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MEDIA RELEASE

People the key to health reform

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The strong focus on consumers in the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) report released this week by Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and Minister for Health and Ageing, Nicola Roxon was today welcomed by leading health consumer organisation, Health Issues Centre.

Health Issues Centre CEO Michael Janssen applauded the Commission for making its first and most important principle that health reform must be 'people and family-centred'.

"These recommendations offer a chance to rebuild health around people, families and wellness," said Mr Janssen. "For too long health has been built largely around illness, professions and institutions."

Mr Janssen noted a recent paper by health policy analyst Jennifer Doggett which showed more than one dollar in every six of the nation's total health spending is paid out of the wallets of consumers - twice as much as private health funds cover.

The paper also reveals that individual payments are the third largest source of health funding (after Federal and State/Territory Governments) and make up a higher proportion of health funding in Australia than in most comparable OECD countries, including the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Ireland, Japan and France, and even the US.

"Consumers are both users and funders of the health system, every bit as important as doctors, hospitals and health insurance companies in the health reform debate," said Mr Janssen. "Merely consulting with some members of the public on a road trip does not do justice to the place of consumers. A health system re-formed around people must include them formally, at all levels, in all sectors and as active partners, not just passive recipients of healthcare reform."

Mr Janssen said in the coming month Health Issues Centre will survey over 200 experienced health consumer representatives about the NHHRC report and feed the results into the next phase of health reform.

The formal involvement of consumers in hospitals and other services is known as 'consumer participation'. Victoria, SA, WA and the ACT have consumer participation organisations and the Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) also provides consumer representatives for national committees. However, Mr Janssen claimed these organisations were under-funded and there was a lack of nationally consistent training and standards on consumer participation in health.

"Despite every government in Australia having policies committing them to consumer participation," said Mr Janssen, "research suggests it has been poorly implemented or supported."

A recent paper by Dr Judy Gregory suggested consumer participation in Australia is poorly understood, inconsistently practiced, and poorly defined. Dr Gregory identified barriers to consumers such as cost, lack of resources and unfamiliarity with how health services work. Health services also have barriers such as negative attitudes towards consumers' input and poor support for consumer engagement.

"If being people-centred is the first principle of the new health system," said Mr Janssen, "then resources must be made available for wide-spread, effective, and long-term consumer participation in these reforms."

"Victorian law requires its 20 largest health services to establish a Community Advisory Committee," said Mr Janssen. "That is a good start – but future reform needs to take consumer participation to a new depth throughout the health system and especially in primary and preventative health where consumer engagement and self-care is crucial."

Health Issues Centre is partially funded by the Victorian Government and supports health consumer participation, research and training. It provides a website with extensive information on consumer participation and runs a program linking consumer representatives with health services.

Consumers, health professionals, health services, and policy makers interested in assistance with health consumer participation can visit the website at www.healthissuescentre.org.au to find out more.

For further information contact:

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References:

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