

Preventive Care Crucial To Unclogging Hospitals

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THOUSANDS of sick Victorians are filling hospitals each year because their illnesses are not being prevented or adequately managed by GPs and other specialists.

Statistics on avoidable hospital admissions collected by the Victorian Department of Health reveal that, in 2009-10, 180,858 people were admitted to hospital with conditions that could have been avoided with early interventions delivered by primary-care practitioners such as GPs, dentists or physiotherapists. It is a 24 per cent jump from 2000-01, when there were 145,570 such admissions.

People with diabetes complications made up the biggest group, accounting for 63,185 or one-third of all avoidable admissions in 2009-10. Dental conditions were the next most common at 16,443 admissions, followed by 14,547 admissions for emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Other conditions on the list include asthma, high blood pressure and vaccine-preventable illnesses.

Victorian Healthcare Association chief executive Trevor Carr said the figures suggested that not enough had been done to increase primary healthcare services in line with the increasing prevalence of lifestyle-related conditions such as obesity.

He said the avoidable admissions would have cost about \$450 million in 2009-10 - about the same amount of money the Victorian government spent on dental and preventative healthcare services in the same year. Mr Carr said although the government had promised 800 new hospital beds over the next four years, it also needed to introduce ways to prevent people from requiring hospital treatment in the first place.

"We do need more hospital beds but we can't just keep flooding the system with more beds, because they are expensive to build and expensive to resource ... We need more prevention and primary healthcare as well," he said.

The president of the Australian Medical Association's Victorian branch, Harry Hemley, said the figures showed that more needed to be done to keep diabetics healthy and out of hospital. "We really need to be able to manage these complicated diabetic patients with a sophisticated plan. The AMA thinks GP practices should have special case co-ordinators who can identify patients with problems and organise services to make sure they are taking their medications and getting access to all the other allied health practitioners they need to see to keep them well."

Victorian Health Minister David Davis said measures would be announced in the budget to tackle prevention of health problems and unnecessary hospital use. He said hospital readmissions - patients returning to hospital because they have been discharged too early or without enough support in the community - were also a problem.

"The Victorian government is committed to introducing a health innovation and

reform council, and one of its early tasks will be to work with health services and focus on problems like high levels of readmissions," he said.

A federal government spokesman said it was investing about \$2 billion in improving access to primary healthcare to keep people well and out of hospital, including \$1.2 billion for training more GPs and specialists.