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News Release

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Youth health compromised by Federal Bill

The start of National Youth Week celebrations on Sunday could be dampened by new laws mooted by the Federal Government which aim to increase parental access to young people's medical records, says Australia's peak body representing the Divisions of General Practice.

The Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) Chair Dr Rob Walters says the proposed Health Legislation Amendment (Parental Access to Information) Bill 2003 threatens the development of healthy relationships between young people and their general practitioners.

"Given that the goal of National Youth Week, supported all Federal and State Ministers for Youth, is to encourage and empower young people to fully participate in their communities, it is unfortunate that the Federal Government is considering taking away their access to confidential health care.

"The reality is that many young people are already reluctant consumers of primary health care services and research shows that concerns about confidentiality of medical consultations are a major barrier to young people accessing care. Access to confidential medical care is therefore essential for many young people to develop positive relationships with a GP," Dr Walters says.

"Young Australians are among the most vulnerable groups when it comes to health care and we must empower them to take responsibility for decisions about their health and remove barriers preventing them seeking quality and appropriate medical advice and treatment," said Dr Walters.

The Bill is designed to allow parents to access Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme data held by the Health Insurance Commission (HIC) about their children under the age of 16 years. Until July 2003, parents could not access information about doctors' visits made by their children using a Medicare card once the child turned 12, unless the parents had the consent of the child. The HIC lifted this age of consent from 12 to 14 in July, 2003.

Dr George Cerchez, Chair of the National Divisions Youth Alliance (NDYA), says the reality is that many young people are not comfortable having an open and honest discussion with a health care provider in front of parents and may not even want their parents to know that they are seeing a doctor about sensitive health and emotional issues.

"For these young people, GPs are a vital source of accessible, comprehensive primary health care services and the first point of call in the identification, treatment and referral of their health and emotional concerns," says Dr Cerchez.

"While GPs mostly encourage young people to share important health-related issues with parents and supportive adults, it is important to recognise that during the normal transition period of adolescence, relationships with parents, peer and community change.

"The rights of young people as capable and autonomous health consumers must be respected and balanced against the rights of parents to receive information about their children's independent health-seeking."

Dr Walters and Dr Cerchez say ADGP and NDYA are concerned that this new legislation will serve as a deterrent to some young people accessing general practice services and further marginalise those young people 'at risk' as well as those already estranged from families.

ADGP is the peak national body representing Australia's 120 Divisions of General Practice. About 95 per cent of GPs belong to a local Division of General Practice.

NDYA supports Division programs that aim to improve the health of young people, primarily through facilitating youth access to general practice services.

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