

Quality and accessible healthcare should be available to all Australians, but with the cost of living continuing to rise and the poverty divide growing, more people are finding it difficult to cover medical expenses that come with out-of-pocket and unexpected fees.

Released today, the latest issue of the [Australian Health Review](#), the Australian Healthcare and Hospital Association's peer-reviewed journal, features research that highlights the issues of access and equity in Australia's healthcare system.

'There can be many barriers for people accessing medical care but a key one is affordability,' says Australian Health Review Editor-in-Chief Dr Sonj Hall.

'Out-of-pocket expenses for medical services can vary widely depending on where you live, what services you are trying to access as well as variation between individual providers.'

Research from the University of Technology Sydney examines the link between out-of-pocket fees from specialist medical services and equity of access, finding that high costs could present an overall access barrier for people who are in lower socioeconomic demographics.

'While there can on occasion be some price reduction on the part of an individual provider in the case of patients with lower or no incomes, this does not make up for the overall disadvantage to those who can't afford services that are not 100% bulk billed through Medicare. This means that patients are more likely to delay or avoid care and treatment altogether,' says Dr Hall.

'There is also the issue of transparency and out-of-pocket costs. Government-provided online tools that estimate costs for a particular service or procedure do not consider the vast variation of prices across different providers, using the median price as a guide. This means the real cost you could expect to pay could be considerably higher than the estimates listed online.'

This issue of the Australian Health Review also draws attention to improving access and uptake of healthcare pathways, such as those for mental health services.

Researchers from the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, explore how better access to mental health services can be achieved for children with chronic medical conditions through pathways that connect directly through specialists rather than needing a new referral through a GP.

'By designing pathways into mental health services that factor in cost, waiting times and recommendations from current medical providers, we could improve uptake of services for children who often have unmet mental health needs.'

The online version of this [media release](#) can be found on the AHHA website and the latest issue of the [Australian Health Review](#) can be read on the CSIRO website.

The Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association is the national peak body for public and not-for-profit healthcare.

Media enquiries: Dr Sonj Hall, Editor in Chief, Australian Health Review
0427 613 587