

SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS LEGISLATION COMMITTEE

Estimates (Public)

Wednesday 2nd June 2021

CANBERRA

Senator SIEWERT: Can I go to the opioid dependency treatment program. We've had a series of questions and answers over the last couple of estimates. I want to go to the postmarket review of the program and ask about the time frame for the review.

Mrs Platona: The process for the postmarket review is public. It has been established and in place for a number of years. The steps in the review are all established. The first step is the draft terms of reference. The Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee considered the draft terms of reference and endorsed them, and it's meeting on 7 May.

Senator SIEWERT: It was released on 7 May?

Mrs Platona: The Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee considered and endorsed draft terms of reference on 7 May. The minister for health has to approve them, and the minister did so on 25 May. They are now on the website as of 28 May. The draft terms of reference are available for consultation, and the public consultation on the draft terms of reference closes on 30 June. The next step after that is to review all the comments and make amendments as necessary to the draft terms of reference, and they go back to PBAC. We are hoping that the next available meeting of the PBAC is either in July or August to have a final set of terms of reference. In parallel to that, we are working on establishing a reference committee to lead the review. There will be a chair of this reference committee to establish a process for postmarket reviews.

Senator SIEWERT: Thank you for that. On the established process for a review committee, who is usually on those reviews committees?

Mrs Platona: The PBAC is part of the decision-making. The minister endorses participation on the reference committee. There are people who are the most eminent experts in the field of drug and alcohol services, in a research and academic capacity, from the states and territories and so on, as it may be—patient consumer organisations, clinicians.

Senator SIEWERT: Would, for example, someone from Harm Reduction Australia be included in the group, and someone with lived experience?

Mrs Platona: The answer to that would be yes. It is our intention to invite the president of Harm Reduction Australia, Mr Gino Vumbaca, to join the group.

Senator SIEWERT: Would there be other consumers involved as well?

Mrs Platona: We are trying to find as broad a participation in this review as possible. It will probably be a larger reference committee than we'd usually have for post-market reviews. We usually invite, for example, a representative from the Consumers Health Forum or other consumer organisations that work in this area and know the reality of people that would, or do, benefit from this program.

Senator SIEWERT: What's the time frame? I realise they're only draft terms of reference, but what is the completion date for the review?

Mrs Platona: The PBAC needs to finalise the terms of reference, following this period of consultation, during June. Then there's going to be a call for public submissions from everyone. So we are hoping that it will be by the July PBAC meeting the following year. Twelve months is what we said last time, and then we would finish the work.

Senator SIEWERT: So if they're not finished by July/August, it will be July/August the following year, 2022?

Mrs Platona: It will be 12 months from when we have the final terms of reference approved by the committee and approved by the minister and can open public consultation on it and finish the review.

Senator SIEWERT: Twelve months is quite a long time. We've already been through, a number of times, the fact that there's a lot of concern—including from myself—about the costs of the current program. As an interim step, is any consideration being given to the proposal that I understand Harm Reduction Australia has put forward, which relates to section 85 and section 100? Or are you considering any other approach that deals with the inequities and costs of this program?

Mrs Platona: We have heard the concerns, and I spoke about sharing those concerns. But it is also a \$70 million program, per year. It's growing at 17.4 per cent annually. It has not been reviewed since 1974. For that expenditure, and for historical reasons, a proper process is what we are going through.

Senator SIEWERT: Yes. I was asking about the interim, while that process is being undertaken. I have definitely heard what you said—that you want a proper process—but I'm also making the point that, at the moment, there are inequities there. People are paying significant costs, and that is putting off people who need treatment and support. Is anything being considered in the interim?

Ms Shakespeare: We will continue to support this very important program, under which people are accessing opioid dependency medicines through pharmacies. States and territories are continuing to operate their schemes. In some states and territories, access to the medicines is free of charge, through public clinics.

Senator SIEWERT: Not all. Ms Shakespeare: We have lots of other investments to help people manage opioid dependency. We have new investments in the recent budget, with \$74 million in alcohol and drug treatment services. We have real-time prescription monitoring. We have take-home naloxone programs. There are a lot of different investments that the government is making to support people.

Senator SIEWERT: I'm not criticising any of those, and it's great that there's more funding available. But that doesn't help these people. We've been through this before, over several estimates now—the costs of this program and the inequities for people using the program. Ms Shakespeare: That's what is going to be looked at.

Senator SIEWERT: I know that's what is going to be looked at through the review, but it's 14 months away, at least. I'm not here to have a go about that length of time. I understand a proper process is being put in place. But in that 14 months there are a lot of people that are going to be subject to the inequities of the program.

Ms Shakespeare: The arrangements that we've had in place with the states and territories to share the costs of delivery of this therapy, arrangements which have been in place since 1974, will continue while we're reviewing the program.

Senator SIEWERT: Have you had a look at the proposal from Harm Reduction Australia?

Ms Shakespeare: We have, and I think that's exactly the sort of thing that will be looked at through this postmarket review program. We do need to look at models of care and what's going to provide the best access to holistic care for people—the most appropriate models of care, pharmacotherapy and other treatments.

Senator SIEWERT: In other words, you're not doing anything for 14 months?

Ms Shakespeare: We're going to be working very hard on the review.

Senator SIEWERT: But not on addressing the current problems with the program that people are facing. In the longer term, yes, you're doing the review, but in the short term people are still going to be subject to the inequities of the program.

Senator Colbeck: The point of the program is to address those inequities. That's why we're doing it. As Ms Shakespeare said, the program has been there for a while now, since '74. An appropriate process to establish, in a proper and structured way, an approach forward is the appropriate thing for us to do, and that is exactly what we're doing.

Senator SIEWERT: So you don't take on board that the current uncapped and unregulated fees which are being applied in some places are having a negative impact on people's use of this program?

Senator Colbeck: As Ms Shakespeare said, we have taken on board the views that have been put to us as part of the process that we're going through. We acknowledge those things.

Ms Shakespeare: We're also continuing to work with the states and territories on this process, and we'll continue to make representations to them about having greater consistency in the approaches that they take. And, as I mentioned, we're making further investments in drug and alcohol treatment services through our programs in the Commonwealth.

Senator SIEWERT: I will continue to harangue you on this one. I have one more set of questions. I have lots of others, but I'll put them on notice.