

Removing Medicare exclusion would improve prisoner health

October 9 2018, by Jess Reid



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An expert in prisoner health from The University of Western Australia is calling for the Federal Government to stop excluding prisoners from Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) to improve health outcomes and close the gap for Aboriginal people.

In an article published in the *Journal of Law and Medicine Research* Fellow Craig Cumming, from the UWA Centre for Health Services Research, examines the impact of the exclusion on the health of prisoners, who often have [high rates](#) of [mental illness](#) and drug dependence when they enter prison.

Mr Cumming said recent research showed that prison health services in WA did not have sufficient resources to meet the health needs of prisoners, particularly in the areas of mental illness and Aboriginal health.

"Aboriginal people are over-represented by 15 times in Western Australian prisons, making up 37 per cent of the prison population, the highest over-representation anywhere in Australia, and they generally experience poorer health than non-Aboriginal people," he said.

"Removing the exclusion for prisoners would mean that two important Medicare-funded services – the Mental Health Care Plan and the Indigenous Health Check – would be available to prisoners.

"These two items alone could have a major impact on improving the health of prisoners, given the high rates of mental illness and the Aboriginal over-representation in prisons."

Mr Cumming said prisons and prison health services were funded exclusively by State governments but the Federal Health Minister had the discretion to make available Medicare and PBS services and products where there was a clear need for them.

"The proposed change would see around 41,000 prisoners given access to Medicare and the PBS, compared to the 24 million people in Australia who already have access," he said.

"This would be a negligible increase in cost but more importantly, an investment in improving the [health](#) of people in prison, most of whom will be released back into the community, and giving them access to [health care facilities](#) equivalent to those available to the rest of the community."

More information: Craig Cumming et al. In *Sickness and in Prison: The Case for Removing the Medicare Exclusion for Australian Prisoners*. *Journal of Law and Medicine update*: Vol 26 Pt 1 2018

Provided by University of Western Australia

Citation: Removing Medicare exclusion would improve prisoner health (2018, October 9)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-medicare-exclusion-prisoner-health.html>

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