**Election 2019 – Health**

# Why is this an issue for women?

* Women face specific health care needs and without a national women’s health policy these cannot be adequately addressed. Health care research generally focuses on men, despite symptoms often differing between men and women. For example, heart attacks in women can often present with much more subtle symptoms which are easily ignored. The focus on men’s symptoms is a factor which contributes to heart disease being the biggest killer of Australian women.
* Women continue to be negatively affected by the impact of the Medicare freeze which has lowered to Medicare rebate by $2.50 in real terms. According to the AMA despite the freeze being lifted in the 2018-19 Budget it continues to impact on the affordability of GP visits [(SMH, 2019)](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/ama-demands-more-funding-to-let-doctors-spend-more-time-with-patients-20190128-p50u47.html). Women make up the majority of GP visits with approximately 60 per cent of GP visits made by women and a further 11 per cent by children ([Britt H. et al, 2014](https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/11882/4/9781743324226_ONLINE.pdf)) and are disproportionally affected by the lower rebate and higher out of pocket costs.
* Preventative health care is critical for women, with 27 per cent of adult females currently categorised as obese ([AIHW, 2018](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/behaviours-risk-factors/overweight-obesity/overview)). This increases the risks of a number of diseases including heart disease, diabetes and cancer. One in two Australian women have a chronic disease.
* Women are more likely to live in poverty than men ([ACOSS, 2018](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf)), and therefore socio-economic inequalities disproportionally impact women. Mothers in the lowest socioeconomic areas are 60 per cent more likely to have a low birth weight baby than mothers in the highest socio-economic areas in 2013 ([AIHW, 2017](https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/033f461e-d730-40bb-834e-198f6726222f/19580.pdf.aspx?inline=true)).

**Election commitments**

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| Full implementation | Partial implementation | No or negative response |

The table below sets out how fully parties’ current election commitments address NFAW recommendations:

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| **NFAW RECOMMENDATION** |
| Government should develop a new National Women’s Health Policy 2020 to address the specific health issues facing women. |
| **PARTY COMMITMENTS** |
| **ALP** | **LNP** | **GREENS** |
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| **NFAW RECOMMENDATION** |
| Government should reverse the Medicare freeze and restore indexation to all Medicare items. |
| **PARTY COMMITMENTS** |
| **ALP** | **LNP** | **GREENS** |
| The ALP committed to lifting the Medicare Freeze during the 2016 Election, and re-committed in the lead up to the 2019-20 Budget. | NFAW welcomes the lifting of the Medicare freeze from remaining Medicare items at a cost $187.2 million over four years, but notes that the impact of the freeze is ongoing, and patients will continue to pay more out of pocket costs to visit the GP. | The Greens committed to lifting the Medicare Freeze in March 2019. |
| **NFAW RECOMMENDATION** |
| Government should establish a National Preventative Health Agency to address the rising incidence of chronic disease |
| **PARTY COMMITMENTS** |
| **ALP** | **LNP** | **GREENS** |
| The ALP has committed $8.6 million for skin cancer awareness campaign and a further $10 million to boost participation in bowel cancer screening.ALP has also announced that it will establish a new National Health Reform Commission modelled on the Productivity Commission. | The Budget included $1.1 million for Health Star rating system and $5.5 million in 2018-19 and 2019-20 for mental health services in areas impacted by natural disasters. Otherwise there was no funding for prevention in the Budget.  | Greens have expressed a general commitment to preventative health but not explicit policies. |

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| **NFAW RECOMMENDATION** |
| In accordance with WHO recommendations, Government should review all health policies and programs for their impact health inequality. |
| **PARTY COMMITMENTS** |
| **ALP** | **LNP** | **GREENS** |
| The ALP has announced National Rural Health Strategy in recognition of the challenges that rural and regional Australians face which require more targeted support. | No policies. | A general commitment but no policies. |

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| OTHER ELECTION COMMITMENTS |
| Commitment | **Party** | **Comments** |
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| $27.7 million over four years from 2019-20 for an additional 41 breast care nurse positions. | LNP | Given that access to a breast care nurse is considered gold standard care, this funding should be extended to ensure all Australian women fighting breast cancer have access to a breast care nurse as part of their treatment. |
| $4.0 million over seven years from 2018-19 for The Esther Foundation young women’s residential health, development and leadership program to provide counselling to assist with issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health and self-harm. | LNP | NFAW welcomes this investment in a successful service assisting women in Western Australia. |
| $308.9 million over five years from 2018-19 for improved access to diagnostic imaging services. This includes subsidise two new items on the Medicare Benefit Schedule (MBS) for the diagnosis of breast cancer using MRI; and provide access to two new items on the MBS for whole body Fluorodeoxyglucose Positron Emission Tomography for the evaluation of breast cancer. | LNP | NFAW welcomes the additional funding for the identification of breast cancer, which will help ensure timely diagnosis and access to treatment for the 19,000 Australian women diagnosed each year. |
| $736.6 million for a range of new program to support the mental health of Australians. | LNP | NFAW supports the additional funding includes $43.9 million for women and families affected by perinatal mental illness. |
| $42.5 million in 2018-19 to expand the Community Sport Infrastructure Grants Program. | LNP | NFAW welcomes the focus on improving access for women and girls to local sport.  |
| ALP’s $2.3 billion Cancer plan will provide:* $600 million towards for diagnostic imaging, with up to six million free cancer scans funded through Medicare;
* $433 million to fund free consultations with oncologists and surgeons for cancer patients;
* $500 million to slash waiting times for cancer patients in public hospitals;
 | ALP | NFAW welcomes this important investment in Medicare which will help reduce out of pocket costs for cancer treatment, however notes this will not address the high out of pocket costs which impact access and affordability across Australia’s health system. |
| $2.8 billion Better Hospital Fund including $1 billion for capital spending and $250 million for an elective surgery Blitz | ALP | NFAW welcomes this substantial investment in public health care, however cautions the allocation of capital funding during election campaigns which can lead to political investments rather than the high value and evidence based investment decisions. |
| Freezing Private Health Insurance Premiums and Review of Private Health Insurance | ALP | NFAW welcomes the review of private health insurance in Australia, and the ongoing value it provides to the Australian health system. |
| Labor will develop and implement Australia’s first National Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy to deliver improved reproductive choice and better health outcomes for Australian women and their families.  | ALP | NFAW welcomes this commitment – please see separate NFAW paper on Reproductive Health. |

Authorised by Kate Gunn, Sydney.