

**Commencement date: 1 May 2020**

## **Section 19AA - Updates to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

To support doctors responding to the COVID-19 pandemic the Department of Health is implementing a number of short term measures to waive or streamline Medicare requirements.

These short term measures will ensure eligible doctors can continue to satisfy their obligations under section 19AA of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* and provide Medicare services to patients in their current practice.

The Department of Health will provide eligible doctors a 6 month extension to workforce program placements (3GA placements) expiring from 1 May 2020 and will continue these extensions on a month-by-month basis while the COVID-19 pandemic remains. Some ongoing program requirements will also be waived.

### **What programs do the measures apply to?**

These measures apply to the:

- Special Approved Placements Program (SAPP)
- Approved Medical Deputising Services (AMDS)
- More Doctors for Rural Australia Program (MDRAP)
- Rural Locum Relief Program (RLRP)
- RACGP Practice Experience Program (PEP)
- ACRRM Independent Pathway

### **Who is eligible to be extended?**

All doctors who are not within 6 months of the maximum participation period will automatically be extended for 6 months. Doctors who are reaching the maximum participation period for their program will be reviewed before an extension is granted.

Maximum program participation periods are:

- SAPP – 2 years (5 years in extenuating circumstances)
- AMDS – 10 years
- MDRAP – 2 years (4 years in extenuating circumstances)
- RLRP – 2 or 4 years

The review will consider a doctor's prior 3GA program participation, progress to fellowship and exam history.

### **How will I get an extension?**

The Department of Health and the Rural Workforce Agencies will automatically extend eligible doctors whose program participation is due to expire over the next 6 months – there is no need to submit an application. The extension will be granted for a period of 6 months from the expiry date. Placement extensions will be sent to Services Australia for processing on a monthly basis.

Any doctors approaching the maximum participation period for a program will be reviewed, to ensure the program intent is being met. The Department will automatically review their placement for extension in the month prior to their placement expiring and will confirm the outcome via email/letter.

**Do I need to do anything?**

Doctors will not need to submit an application to extend their existing placement or a Medicare provider number form. This will reduce the administrative burden on doctors and ensure they can focus on providing care to their patients.

**What if I want to work at a new practice?**

There are no changes to the process to apply for a new placement. The Department of Health and the Rural Workforce Agencies will assess the application against the current provisions in the guidelines.

**Will this extension contribute to my program time limit?**

No, these extensions will not contribute to the maximum program participation limits. This extension is a short term measure to support the COVID-19 response. Doctors will not be disadvantaged.

**How will I know when I am extended?**

Doctors will receive a confirmation letter from Services Australia to confirm the extension. If a doctor is not automatically extended (for example, if program time limits have been exceeded) they will be notified by the Department of Health or the Rural Workforce Agency.

**What if I can't meet the ongoing program requirements?**

The Department of Health is suspending all program requirements for 6 months.

Due to current circumstances doctors are not able meet ongoing program requirements. Requirements to undertake specific education, apply to college led fellowship programs and take fellowship exams will be suspended.

**What if my 19AB exemption is expiring too?**

Measures are in place for the extension related 19AB exemptions. Information can be found at [\(link to 19AB page\)](#).

**Why aren't you relaxing location restrictions?**

The Department of Health appreciates that the doctors and medical practices across Australia are currently facing significant pressures due to increased workloads and reduced workforce availability due to the broad nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of these practices are in Distribution Priority Areas (DPAs) and Districts of Workforce Shortage (DWS), and were already facing significant challenges. As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, one of the main priorities of the Australian Government is to ensure workforce distribution measures are not impacted in order to maintain workforce in communities most in need, particularly in rural and remote areas. This includes maintaining legislative requirements for

new applications under the Act. It is important that doctors that were otherwise required to work in a DPA or a DWS are not drawn away from these communities in need.

**What if I am going to work in a Commonwealth funded Respiratory Clinic?**

Separate funding arrangements are in place for the Respiratory Clinics, doctors do not need access to a Medicare benefit. If you do not already have a Medicare provider number at the location you can apply for a “refer and request only” Medicare provider number. These applications will be prioritised by Services Australia.

**What about AMDS program requirements?**

Specific measures have been put in place for the AMDS program. Information can be found at [\(link to AMDS page\)](#).

**What happens after 6 months?**

We are operating in a rapidly changing environment. The Department of Health is continually reviewing our policy settings to support the health workforce and the Australian community. We will provide updated advice over the coming months.

**How will I find out when these short-term measures end?**

Where the changes have resulted in an extension of a placement for an individual, a letter will confirm the new conditions including the expiry date of any changes.

Where the changes are wider (eg waiver of the need to undertake exams, due to none being scheduled), the department will communicate to all stakeholders with details of cessation of changes.

**What happens to my extended placement when these changes cease?**

Any placement already extended will remain in place until the amended expiry date. Usual requirements (eg need to submit applications, enrolment for exams etc) will then resume.

## **Section 19AB - Updates to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

To support doctors responding to the COVID-19 pandemic the Department of Health is implementing a number of short term measures to waive or streamline Medicare requirements.

These short term measures will ensure eligible doctors can continue to satisfy their obligations under section 19AB of the *Health Insurance Act 1973* and provide Medicare services to patients in their current practice.

The Department of Health will provide doctors a 6 month extension to section 19AB exemptions expiring from 1 May 2020 onwards, and will continue these exemptions on a month-by-month basis while the COVID-19 pandemic remains.

### **Who is eligible to be extended?**

All doctors with an exemption expiring after 1 May 2020 will be considered for an extension. While we anticipate that these extensions will be required for the next 6 months, the Department will reconsider the need should the COVID-19 situation change significantly.

### **How will I get an extension?**

The Department of Health will automatically extend expiring section 19AB exemptions. The extension will be granted for a period 6 months from the expiry date. Section 19AB exemptions will be sent to Services Australia for processing on a monthly basis.

### **Do I need to do anything?**

Doctors will not need to submit a Medicare provider number form. This will reduce the administrative burden on doctors and ensure they can focus on providing care to their patients.

### **How will I know when I am extended?**

Doctors will receive a confirmation letter from Services Australia to confirm the extension.

### **What if I am on a 6 month locum placement?**

The Department will allow a second 6 month locum placement at the current location. Services Australia will automatically process these extensions however there is no obligation to utilise the extension. If an alternate locum placement has been arranged or commenced, simply ignore the extension.

### **What if my 3GA placement is expiring too?**

Measures are in place for the extension of some 3GA placements. Information can be found at ([link to 19AA page](#)).

### **What if I want to work at a new practice?**

There are no changes to the process to apply for a section 19AB exemption at a new location. The Department of Health will assess the application against the provisions in the guidelines.

### **Why aren't you relaxing location restrictions?**

The Department of Health appreciates that the doctors and medical practices across Australia are currently facing significant pressures due to increased workloads and reduced workforce availability due to the broad nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of these practices are in Distribution Priority Areas (DPAs) and Districts of Workforce Shortage (DWS), and were already facing significant challenges. As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, one of the main priorities of the Australian Government is to ensure workforce distribution measures are not impacted in order to maintain workforce in communities most in need, particularly in rural and remote areas. This includes maintaining legislative requirements for new applications under the Act. It is important that doctors that were otherwise required to work in a DPA or a DWS are not drawn away from these communities in need.

### **What if I am going to work in a Commonwealth funded Respiratory Clinic?**

Separate funding arrangements are in place for the Respiratory Clinics, doctors do not need access to a Medicare benefit. If you do not already have a Medicare provider number at the location you can apply for a "refer and request only" Medicare provider number. These applications will be prioritised by Services Australia.

### **What happens after 6 months?**

We are currently operating in a rapidly changing environment. The Department of Health is continually reviewing our policy settings to support the health workforce and the Australian community. We will provide updated advice over the coming months.

### **How will I find out when these short-term measures end?**

Where the changes have resulted in an extension of a placement for an individual, a letter will confirm the new conditions including the expiry date of any changes.

Where the changes are wider (eg waiver of the need to undertake exams, due to none being scheduled), the department will communicate to all stakeholders with details of cessation of changes.

### **What happens to my extended placement when these changes cease?**

Any placement already extended will remain in place until the amended expiry date. Usual requirements (eg need to submit applications, enrolment for exams etc) will then resume.

## **Approved Medical Deputising Services Program - Updates to support the response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

To support doctors and service providers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic the Department of Health is implementing a number of short term measures to waive or streamline Medicare requirements.

These short term measures will ensure eligible doctors and service providers can continue to satisfy their obligations under the AMDS program and provide Medicare services to the community.

The Department of Health will grant eligible doctors a 6 month extension to placements expiring after 1 May 2020, and will continue to process these extensions on a month-by-month basis while the COVID-19 pandemic remains. Expiring Deeds will be extended on the same basis. Some ongoing program requirements will also be waived or suspended. Details of these are below.

### **Who is eligible to be extended?**

All doctors who are not reaching the maximum participation period within the next 6 months will automatically be extended for 6 months. Doctors who have reached the maximum participation period for their program will be reviewed before an extension is granted.

As Accreditation visits have been cancelled all Deeds expiring from 1 May 2020 onwards will automatically be extended for a 6 month period or until Accreditation visits resume. Extensions will be processed at least a month before the Deed expires. Deed extensions will continue while the COVID-19 pandemic remains.

### **How will I get an extension?**

The Department of Health will automatically extend eligible doctors with expiring placements. The extension will be granted for a period 6 months from the expiry date. Placement extensions will be sent to Services Australia for processing on a monthly basis.

For any Deeds expiring the Department of Health will automatically issue a Variation of Deed to extend the period for 6 months from the expiry date. All doctors will be extended for the same period.

### **Do I need to do anything?**

Doctors will not need to submit an application to extend their existing placement or a Medicare provider number form. Service providers do not need to apply for a Variation of Deed.

This will reduce the administrative burden on doctors and ensure they can focus on providing care to their patients.

All doctors and service providers will receive a letter confirming extension dates. Where a doctor or service provider is not to be extended for any reason, the Department will advise of this at least a month prior to their placement or Deed expiring.

**Will this extension contribute to my program time limit?**

No, these extensions will not contribute to the maximum program participation limits. This extension is a short term measure to support the COVID-19 response. Doctors will not be disadvantaged.

**How will I know when I am extended?**

Doctors will receive a confirmation letter from Services Australia to confirm the extension. If a doctor is not automatically extended they will be notified by the Department of Health.

Service providers will be sent an email confirming a Variation of Deed.

**What if I can't meet the ongoing program requirements?**

The Department of Health is suspending all program requirements for 6 months, unless it becomes possible to undertake these requirements earlier.

For the AMDS program this includes:

- General Practice Experience assessments (GPE)
- Advanced Life Support certification (ALS)

These requirements are suspended for all current AMDS doctors.

**What if I want to work at a new practice?**

There are no changes to the process to apply for a new placement. The Department of Health will assess the application against the current provisions in the guidelines. While it is desirable that an AMDS doctor has a current ALS, we understand that this may not be possible. Non-current ALS will be acceptable during this time. If no ALS or GPE has been undertaken, an application will still be considered and will depend on experience and previous placements etc.

**Why aren't you relaxing location restrictions?**

The Department of Health appreciates that the doctors and medical practices across Australia are currently facing significant pressures due to increased workloads and reduced workforce availability due to the broad nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of these practices are in Distribution Priority Areas (DPAs) and Districts of Workforce Shortage (DWS), and were already facing significant challenges. As the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve, one of the main priorities of the Australian Government is to ensure workforce distribution measures are not impacted in order to maintain workforce in communities most in need, particularly in rural and remote areas. This includes maintaining legislative requirements for new applications under the Act. It is important that doctors that were otherwise required to work in a DPA or a DWS are not drawn away from these communities in need.

**I am a new Medical Deputising Service can I apply to join the AMDS?**

Not at this time. All service providers who participate in the AMDS program must be accredited by one of the Accreditation Agencies that accredit against the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Standards for after-hours and medical deputising services. Accreditation Agencies are not currently undertaking assessment visits so no new applications are being considered at this time.

**What if I am going to work in a Commonwealth funded Respiratory Clinic?**

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**What happens after 6 months?**

We are currently operating in a rapidly changing environment. The Department of Health is continually reviewing our policy settings to support the health workforce and the Australian community. We will provide updated advice over the coming months.

**How will I find out when these short-term measures end?**

Where the changes have resulted in an extension of a placement for an individual, a letter will confirm the new conditions including the expiry date of any changes.

Where the changes are wider (eg waiver of the need to undertake exams, due to none being scheduled), the department will communicate to all stakeholders with details of cessation of changes.

**What happens to my extended placement when these changes cease?**

Any placement already extended will remain in place until the amended expiry date. Usual requirements (eg need to submit applications, enrolment for exams etc) will then resume.