

Does cost drive primary care patients to New Zealand's Emergency Departments? Authors' reply to letter from Dr Ben Gray

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to a critique of our recent paper in the *Journal* by Dr Gray.¹

Dr Gray believes that the conclusion of our systematic review² is flawed due to the source studies for the review spanning the length and breadth of New Zealand over almost 50 years. We take the alternative view that as the studies are remarkably consistent regardless of era and location, the conclusion is more robust not less.

From our review it was clear that the cost of primary care is a factor for only a small minority of patients presenting to New Zealand's emergency departments (EDs). Subsequent to the completion of our study the Ministry of Health published the results of a survey of current ED use among 12,000 adults and 4000 caregivers of children in 2011/12. The results mirrored our review findings exactly: only "One in 40 adults used an emergency department because of cost".³

We agree with Dr Gray that the ED is not a good place to provide primary care. EDs in New Zealand provide acute medical and surgical care, not primary care. The vast majority of patients presenting to EDs in New Zealand are not primary care patients which is why reducing cost barriers to primary care is unlikely to lead to a reduction of acute demand (ED presentations), at least in the short term.

Whether improved access to primary care leads to reduced acute demand in the long term is a different question altogether and one deserving of further research.

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