MEDIA RELEASE

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Carrier Screening Genetic Test available for all Families

The announcement today by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Health Minister Greg Hunt of Medicare funding for a genetic test for couples planning a pregnancy was welcomed by Australian Pathology and its members.

The test, called reproductive carrier screening, checks if couples have a relatively high chance of having a baby with any of three common genetic conditions: cystic fibrosis (CF), spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) and fragile X syndrome (FXS). Improving the accessibility of carrier screening will make an enormous difference to couples starting or extending their families, and will be delivered by the pathology sector across Australia.

“We have been advocating for Medicare funding for carrier screening for many years. Now, all Australian families will be able to access this test with Medicare support from November 2023. It’s a great win for families” said Ms Liesel Wett, CEO of Australian Pathology.

The decision to provide expanded Medicare funding for genetic tests was welcomed by Professor Graeme Suthers, a genetic pathologist and clinician, and Director of Genetics for Sonic Healthcare Australia . He said that, for many women, there is a greater chance of having a baby with one of these serious conditions than of having a child with a chromosome condition such as Down syndrome.

“The availability of carrier screening gives couples the opportunity to make informed decisions about that chance of a serious genetic condition and about their reproductive options. This is great news for our patients,” said Professor Suthers.

“Australian laboratories have been providing this test for some years as we consider it to be an essential part of modern reproductive care. Despite the merit of the test, patients have had to bear the cost of having it. It is great news that Medicare funding will allow all Australians to access a genetic test that has such potential significance for their families”.

Looking more broadly, genetic pathology has become the most progressive pathology discipline. Emerging genetic tests, such as carrier screening, now play a vital role in augmenting traditional pathology and guiding diagnosis, therapy and the monitoring of conditions. In Australia, most of these tests are performed by Australian Pathology’s member practices. With Medicare funding, the financial barriers to accessing these tests is being lowered.

Professor Suthers added, “The addition of Medicare funding means that many more patients have access to genetic tests that provide more accurate information about the chances of a condition, the diagnosis of a condition and the treatment for that condition. Together with their doctors, patients can now make better-informed choices about their healthcare.”

CEO of Australian Pathology, Ms Liesel Wett acknowledged the new Medicare rebates as an investment in the healthcare of Australians. Australian Pathology, the national peak body for private pathology in Australia, along with its members, is committed to the provision of high quality, affordable, safe and accessible pathology service to all Australians.

“These new genetic tests are the pathology tests of the future and they have a direct impact on the health of many Australians,” she said.

“These are complex tests, that require high-level scientific expertise, and they are done here on our doorstep.”

The addition of these genetic tests to the Medicare Benefits Schedule comes after significant collaboration between the pathology sector and the federal government.

“We will continue to work with the government to make sure that tests are funded appropriately and to ensure families do not face financial barriers when making decisions about their healthcare,” Ms Wett said.

Ms Wett thanked the federal government for recognising the significant impact these tests will have on everyday Australians. The test will be available on Medicare from 01 November 2023.

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