

26 January 2026

Review Panel

Independent review of cohealth general practice and related services

Via submission form

Dear Panel Members,

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) is the peak body for the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector in Victoria. VAADA represents a broad network of organisations that deliver treatment, harm reduction and support services to people who experience AOD related harm.

VAADA strongly supports the continuation and strengthening of cohealth's general practice services, recognising the critical and irreplaceable role cohealth plays in providing accessible, stigma-free primary care to many Victorians experiencing acute disadvantage including AOD dependence.

People who use drugs, including those experiencing dependence, suffer disproportionately poorer health outcomes, while encountering well-documented barriers to receiving appropriate primary healthcare. This includes experiencing stigma and discrimination from health professionals, facing financial difficulties in meeting the cost of healthcare, as well as having limited options for safe and relevant care that addresses a range of different health needs.

cohealth's service model provides a unique offer which directly addresses these barriers through integrated, low-threshold, trauma-informed care that links primary health, pharmacotherapy, mental health and broader social supports. Critically, cohealth provides primary care to a large cohort of people who use drugs and experience dependence, who may otherwise not engage with primary healthcare services at all. For many people, cohealth represents a trusted entry point into the health system. A reduction in the capacity of general practice and related services greatly risks impacting the overall wellbeing of many Victorians with long term AOD dependence issues.

The service model offered by cohealth to support their local community is challenged by the limitations of the Medicare model, which favours high volume, less complex support via bulk billing. While this is suitable for many people, there is a large cohort of Victorians, including many who receive support from cohealth, that this model fails to adequately support. For organisations that work with complexity, cross subsidisation is a necessary way of maintaining appropriate levels of care that address

significant health needs, and in turn manage and prevent further acute health outcomes.

Of particular importance is cohealth's substantial role in Victoria's opioid pharmacotherapy system. cohealth manages approximately **10% of the state's opioid pharmacotherapy treatment capacity**, making it one of the largest and most critical providers supporting people with opioid dependence. This reflects a high level of trust among at risk cohorts. This service is essential to preventing overdose, reducing hospitalisation, supporting stability and improving social and health outcomes for a highly vulnerable group of people. Many of those engaged in this service also engage with cohealth's primary care support which enables a unique wraparound health and wellbeing response.

Any reduction in cohealth's general practice or related services would have immediate and major consequences, including:

- diminished access to primary healthcare for people who use drugs
- increased pressure on already stretched hospital and emergency services
- reduced continuity of care for people receiving opioid pharmacotherapy
- heightened health risks for people with complex co-morbidities
- loss of a culturally safe and trusted service for marginalised communities.

These burdens would occur at great social and financial cost to the Victorian community. cohealth is a cornerstone of Melbourne's harm reduction and treatment ecosystem and a critical safeguard for people who are dependent on drugs and who rely on specialised, integrated and non-judgemental healthcare to remain engaged in treatment and maintain their wellbeing.

VAADA urges the Review Panel to recognise the systemic importance of cohealth's model of care and ensure that the outcome of this review protects and sustains cohealth's capacity to deliver comprehensive general practice and related services. Any diminishing of this capability would significantly weaken health supports available to vulnerable Victorians and exacerbate risks of catastrophic consequences for a group of people that face limited alternatives to maintaining their health and wellbeing.

VAADA recommends that further resourcing be made available to ensure the continuity of cohealth's services and that the Australian Government create a Medicare Benefits Schedule item number that allows general practitioners to account for the resourcing needed to provide primary care support for people with AOD issues including dependence.

VAADA would welcome further engagement with the Review Panel should additional insights be helpful.

Chris Christoforou

Chief Executive Officer