

DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IPTAAS?

The Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme



Dr Johnathon Wake, Radiation Oncologist at Albury Wodonga Regional Cancer Centre

“Do you know about IPTAAS?”

By asking this simple question, medical specialists, GPs, practice nurses and reception staff can let patients know financial assistance is available to help them access specialist care not available locally.

The Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme, known as IPTAAS, helps NSW residents who need to travel more than 100km each way to access specialist health care, or 200km weekly to the same medical provider.

In the Murray region of NSW, Radiation Oncologist Dr Johnathon Wake treats patients with a wide range of cancers; including head and neck, brain and lung. Patients and carers often travel from surrounding areas to attend consultations and access life-saving oncology treatment.

Financial support provided by IPTAAS is an essential part of the cancer treatment pathway for Dr Wake’s patients.

“I discuss IPTAAS with every new patient who is eligible. We introduce ourselves and then I ask the question, ‘Do you know about IPTAAS?’

“Fortunately, many cancer patients have been advised about IPTAAS (by their GP or other specialist) and many have received financial assistance before the radiation oncology stage.

“If patients arrive without knowledge of the financial support available, the Albury Wodonga Regional Cancer Centre helps them apply for IPTAAS.

“We have patient support officers, nurse practitioners and a social worker that are well versed in filling in the paperwork,” Dr Wake said. IPTAAS plays an important role in supporting patients during long periods of cancer treatment.

“Cancer treatment is a long road. After diagnosis and often surgery, radiation therapies are on average 25 to 40 treatments over four to eight weeks. Many patients who live more than one hour drive away will stay in accommodation in Albury during the week and go home for the weekend, which we recommend for their wellbeing. They claim IPTAAS subsidies for accommodation and fuel for each trip.

“It’s a huge undertaking as it means time away from their work and families while staying in Albury. It is critical for these patients to receive IPTAAS,” Dr Wake said.

At the other end of the state, Northern NSW resident Lilli Forrest’s world was turned upside down when she received her cancer diagnosis – a very rare melanoma on the iris of her left eye that needed immediate treatment.

It was the height of the COVID-19

pandemic and Lilli had just discovered she was pregnant with her second child.

Waiting until after her baby was born was not an option and, due to the nature of the cancer, neither was being treated locally. Lilli, who lives near Lismore, received her care in Brisbane approximately 200 kilometres away and so began months of navigating border closures, medical procedures, travel and accommodation and eventually her recovery.

A ray of light in Lilli’s journey was the safe arrival of baby Lucinda who her parents say is a little ball of energy and joy.

Another turning point for Lilli and her family was being able to access IPTAAS.

“Having the IPTAAS program means that you have less financial burden and you’re able to get that treatment as soon as you can,” Lilli said.

For some patients, accessing financial support means the difference between seeking healthcare, or going without. If it wasn’t for IPTAAS, I wouldn’t be here.”



Cancer patient and IPTAAS client Lilli Forrest from Northern NSW

IPTAAS



IPTAAS client Noeline Nicholls and Aboriginal Health Worker Jacob Shanley

As far as Noeline Nicholls is concerned, it's as simple as that – without the financial assistance she received through IPTAAS she would not have sought specialist medical treatment.

“Where we live, we travel to get food, petrol and medical. If I didn't have IPTAAS, I wouldn't have been able to do all the medical things I needed to do,” Noeline said.

Noeline lives at Pilliga in remote NSW – a three-hour drive from Tamworth. She regularly visits Aboriginal Health Worker Jacob Shanley at Tamworth Hospital's Healthy Deadly Foot Clinic to receive essential medical care.

Jacob and his colleagues regularly help patients access IPTAAS to ensure they receive essential care at the Healthy Deadly Foot Clinic.

“One of the biggest barriers we find with people is transport and money. A lot of people are coming to see us from as far away as Pilliga, Moree and Wee Waa, up to three hours away. Our high-risk foot clinic is the closest service,” Jacob said.

Jacob encourages Aboriginal patients to use IPTAAS financial assistance to attend medical appointments.

“There is a lot of pride, especially in our community, about not wanting to take handouts, but if it is going to be the difference between getting to an appointment or not, I say fill out the form and get to your appointment.”

Armidale GP Dr Salma Ali regularly refers her patients to IPTAAS and she's seen first-hand the positive impacts of the scheme.

“It helps them make the decision to see the specialist. It takes away some of the financial burden.”

Dr Ali specialises in care for refugees and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. She says IPTAAS addresses the health inequities faced by regional and CALD patients.

“IPTAAS helps these very vulnerable communities. It helps our regional community access healthcare in an easier and quicker way.”

Dr Ali said awareness of IPTAAS is spreading among the community. “By the time the next generation of refugees come in, I won't need to

educate them – they are already aware of IPTAAS!”

Dr Ali credits the increased awareness and uptake of IPTAAS to all of her team supporting their CALD patients. Reception and nursing staff assist patients in completing the application forms, lessening the load on this very busy regional GP.

IPTAAS provides financial assistance to people from regional NSW to access specialist care, approved allied healthcare services and non-commercial clinical trials.

Eligible patients receive a subsidy for travel and accommodation costs including private vehicle travel (40 cents per km), accommodation (ranging from \$75 – \$120 per night), public transport (trains, buses, and ferries), taxis (includes ride sharing like Uber) and air travel (in special circumstances and with prior approval). **dr.**

To learn more about how IPTAAS can help your patients visit the [IPTAAS website](#) or call your local team on 1800 478 227.



Dr Salma Ali, General Practitioner at Armidale Medical Centre