

Australians facing 4.7-year wait for life-saving medical technologies

Public or private status can determine access, new report warns

Australians face an average 4.7-year wait for life-saving medical technologies, as lengthy and outdated reimbursement systems delay patient access, a new report reveals.

While medical technology advances rapidly overseas, Australia's conservative reimbursement system is slowing patient access to clinically proven innovations.

The [Accelerating Access to Innovative Medical Technologies in Australia report](#)¹ highlights the urgent need to modernise our nation's health technology assessment and reimbursement processes, so patients can benefit from new treatments sooner.

Developed by HTAnalysts in collaboration with Edwards Lifesciences, and informed by a national expert roundtable, the report draws on insights from hospitals, clinicians, patient advocates (hearts4heart; Heart Support Australia), and the medical device (Medical Technology Association of Australia; Pathology Technology of Australia) and pharmaceutical sectors.

Australia lagging behind international standards

Health Economist and Policy Strategist, HT Analysts, A/Prof Colman Taylor, Sydney, said Australia's approval processes are slow and create inequities in patient care.

"Australian patients are waiting [far] too long to access innovative medical technologies, which reduces efficiency, and compromises health outcomes.

"Reform is urgently needed to ensure all Australians can receive timely, life-saving treatments," said A/Prof Colman.

The report warns Australia is falling behind international best practice.²

"While countries such as the UK, Germany, and the US typically approve medical devices within one to two years, Australia can take nearly five years – more than double the time," A/Prof Colman said.

Urgent need in heart disease: a clinical perspective

"For patients living with severe aortic stenosis, waiting years can be the difference between life and death," said Cardiothoracic Surgeon and Director, Cardiothoracic Surgery, Victoria Heart Hospital and Monash Health, Professor Jayme Bennetts, Melbourne.

Each year, around 1,500 patients nationally in the public system miss out on potentially life-saving valve surgery and TAVI (transcatheter aortic valve implantation) procedures due to long delays caused by hospital capacity and funding constraints.³

"In addition, some new and advanced technologies not available in the private sector may see private patients offered inferior prostheses with potentially poorer long term outcomes," said Prof Bennetts.

"Some of these private patients are offered procedures in the public system where these newer technologies are often available in advance of approval privately. This creates added capacity and cost into the public sector healthcare system.

"We urgently need reforms to speed access to these proven technologies for all patients," Prof Bennetts said.

"Across comparable countries, such as Germany and the US, patients are offered faster, provisional access to new medical technologies while evidence is still being gathered. These models have demonstrated that prioritising early patient access, and real-world data collection, can help reduce patient access delays," said Prof Bennetts.

"Our current processes are delaying innovations that could save lives today."

The human cost of delays

Amid escalating Federal/State disputes⁴ over hospital and healthcare funding, Australia's fragmented reimbursement system is deepening inequities in patient care. Public hospital patients may receive innovative treatments sooner, but face long waiting periods due to capacity constraints and strict funding limits.¹ Privately insured patients, despite paying higher premiums, often wait longer because reimbursement decisions must be finalised before treatments can be covered.¹

Otherwise healthy and active consultant, father, and grandfather, Stuart, 54, Sydney, experienced a sudden, 'silent' aortic dissection in July 2022. When presenting to hospital, he was asked whether he wished to be admitted as a "public or private patient." Despite holding premium private health insurance, he was advised to go through the public system – a decision that gave him access to the technology that saved his life, even though his chance of survival at admission was just 10-15 per cent.

"I had no idea that whether I went public or private could change the life-saving care I received," said Stuart.

"I always thought private health cover meant access to the latest treatments. But that's not always how the system works.

"I'd like to see a fairer system so all Australians can get the care they need, when they need it," Stuart said.

Stuart has since mounted a full recovery and now swims 40 laps, four-times-a-week. He is advocating for reform to ensure all Australians have timely access to innovative medical technologies. His story underscores the urgent need for a fairer, more equitable system.

Systemic barriers & solutions

The report identifies several key issues:

1. Complex and lengthy approval pathways create delays in patient access.
2. Fragmented funding and reimbursement pathways create inequities between public and private patients.
3. While overseas models, such as the US and Germany, prioritise real-world data collection, offering faster, provisional access to new technologies while evidence is still being gathered, Australia's assessment relies heavily on traditional clinical trials, under-utilising real-world evidence that could speed decision-making, creating data-gaps.
4. Current processes delay access to proven, life-saving technologies, even for patients paying high private insurance premiums.
5. Narrow definitions of value focusing on cost-effectiveness neglect factors important to patients such as autonomy, independence and indirect societal benefits.

Recommendations for reform

To address these challenges, the report calls for:

- Performance targets to improve reimbursement timelines.
- Priority review pathways linked to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for faster assessments.
- Streamlined assessment and resubmission processes.
- Provisional funding mechanisms in both public and private sectors.
- Stronger focus on patient experiences in decision-making.
- Enhanced clinical expert input and comprehensive value frameworks.
- Greater use of real-world evidence in Medical Services Advisory Committee (MSAC) and Medical Device and Health Technology Advisory Committee (MDHTAC) decisions.
- Ongoing monitoring and public reporting of Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) listing progress.

The proposed reforms aim to ensure ALL Australians – whether public or private patients – gain faster, equitable access to life-saving medical technologies without compromising safety or quality. The Accelerating Access to Innovative Medical Technologies in Australia report can be accessed here: medicaltechdelays.com.au/new-report

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PATIENTS	
Stuart, 54	Consultant, father & grandfather whose answer to one question saved his life: 'Public or private?', SYDNEY
David, 73	How timely cardiac care helped a motorbike & travel enthusiast stay on the road, Trafalgar South, WEST GIPPSLAND
Jilian, 63	Small business owner, support worker, mother & grandmother saved by access to innovative heart surgery, BRISBANE
Najee, 27	Adventure enthusiast & husband, highlighting the value of access to innovative medical technologies, ADELAIDE
Christopher, 76	Retiree, handyman & husband who underwent heart valve treatment, ADELAIDE
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