

# Virus fears spread: survey

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CONFUSION around COVID-19 restrictions are having unintended consequences, including hesitation from patients to seek medical treatment when needed.

A recent survey conducted by independent organisation Health Consumers Tasmania found that nearly one third of participants would not try and access their GP if they needed to, because of concerns around contracting COVID-19.

Researchers from UTAS,

the University of Queensland and the University of Melbourne found that of the 323 Tasmanians who responded to the online survey, only 43.8 per cent indicated they would go to see their GP or doctor as per normal.

A number of people living with chronic illness or disability also reported being afraid of, or having difficulty accessing medications.

HCT chief executive Bruce Levett said the survey was aimed at better understanding the feelings and concerns of Tasmanians when it came to COVID-19.

However, he said the findings had revealed a growing

level of anxiety across the state driven by a fear of catching the virus.

"We need to recognise that some of the current media coming from government has actually discouraged vulnerable groups seeking care, particularly those with disabilities and people with chronic conditions and this isn't what was intended," he said.

"This is a serious issue and the message that the community have heard clearly is around remaining at home at all costs and this may mean not visiting a GP, but unfortunately this is not correct.

"What is needed is a clear-

er conversation that, even as we battle through this coronavirus crisis, it is still important that you continue to look after your health."

A range of new telehealth rebates were introduced in March to help reduce the risk of community transmission of COVID-19.

The temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule items have been made available to GPs, medical practitioners, nurse practitioners, participating midwives and allied health providers.

However, Mr Levett said a significant proportion of those surveyed were not aware of the steps health

professionals were taking through new telehealth initiatives.

"Of concern to Health Consumers Tasmania was that only 26 per cent of those surveyed would use telehealth, whilst 30 per cent would stop going to the doctor full stop," he said.

Health Minister Sarah Courtney, who experienced her first telehealth appointment with a GP in Launceston on Wednesday, said it was important that everyone took care of their underlying health conditions.

"It is easy, it is accessible. So I encourage all Tasmanians to if you're older, if you're

vulnerable, if you're worried about leaving your home, please phone your GP," she said.

"It's really important that people's underlying conditions are looked after during this time. We know we may have restrictions on movement for some period of time, so it's important that those conditions are looked after."

Mr Levett said while HCT felt the government and health officials were doing a good job of keeping the community informed, there was a need to move beyond "law and order" directives.



Sarah Courtney

