

## Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme

**Summary** The Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS) is a NSW Government program which aims to improve access to specialist health treatment. This Policy outlines the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme governance framework and eligibility requirements.

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**Branch contact** 02 9391 9777

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**Audience** All Staff of NSW Health;Primary Health Networks;Care Navigators;Patients;Carers;Regional Communities

## Isolated Patient Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme

### POLICY STATEMENT

NSW Health is committed to ensuring equity of access to timely, high quality health care for people living in regional, rural and remote areas of NSW.

This includes ensuring people living in regional NSW are supported to access specialist health treatment that is not available locally. Highly specialised care sometimes requires significant travel for people living in regional communities. NSW Health recognises the need to ease the financial burden on those who have to travel significant distances to get the specialist care they require. The Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS) is a subsidy scheme towards the cost of accommodation and travel for patients who need to travel to access specialist healthcare.

### SUMMARY OF POLICY REQUIREMENTS

NSW Health provides subsidies for the cost of accommodation and travel for patients and escorts in regional NSW to access the nearest eligible specialist health care. Provision of subsidies must be provided within the eligibility requirements and governance framework outlined in this Policy Directive. To support the payment of subsidies, information on subsidy rates, eligibility, and administrative and procedural matters is detailed in the IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines.

Subsidies are to be paid directly to patients or to nominated Third Party Organisations. Patients must be residents of NSW or Lord Howe Island and be enrolled with Medicare. Patients must travel from their residence for treatment at least 100km (one way), or at least 200kms in a week by making multiple trips to and from the same treatment location, to be eligible for the subsidy. Applications must be submitted within 12 months of the hospital discharge or appointment end date.

The IPTAAS is a subsidy scheme, not a full reimbursement scheme.

Local Health Districts (LHDs) that operate IPTAAS offices are responsible for operation of the scheme at the local level.

Developing and monitoring the IPTAAS0 Assessment Guidelines and the operation of the scheme is the responsibility of EnableNSW.

The NSW Ministry of Health is responsible for setting IPTAAS policy in line with NSW Government directions, providing funding to LHDs and EnableNSW, and monitoring performance of the scheme.

### REVISION HISTORY

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PD2023_038 November-2023	Deputy Secretary, Regional Health	Policy updated to reflect expanded eligibility for Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) Services.
PD2022_041 September-2022	Coordinator General, Regional Health Division	Amended cover page title
PD2022_039 September-2022	Coordinator General, Regional Health Division	Policy updated to reflect expanded eligibility and increased subsidy rates.
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## **1. BACKGROUND**

The Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS) is an NSW Government program which aims to improve access to specialised health treatment for people living in regional, rural and remote areas of NSW.

IPTAAS provides financial assistance to patients and their escorts, particularly in rural or isolated areas, who travel significant distances to access specialised health treatments not available locally.

IPTAAS is a subsidy scheme, not a full reimbursement scheme. IPTAAS subsidises travel and accommodation and is not intended to cover all the costs associated with accessing specialised health treatment.

### **1.1. About this document**

This Policy Directive provides the revised governance framework and eligibility requirements for IPTAAS, following changes to the scheme's eligibility criteria and subsidy levels introduced on 1 August 2022.

The Policy Directive outlines the requirements for IPTAAS eligibility and subsidy options, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the NSW Ministry of Health, EnableNSW and Local Health Districts (LHDs).

This Policy Directive must be read with the [IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines](#), which provides detailed information on subsidy rates, eligibility, and administrative and procedural matters. The IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines provide further detail and clarification on how the scheme is implemented. Decisions regarding claims that fall outside the assessment criteria are made on a discretionary basis by the Ministry of Health.

### **1.2. Key definitions**

<b>Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services</b>	A primary health care service initiated and operated by the local Aboriginal community to deliver holistic, comprehensive, and culturally appropriate health care to the community, which controls it through a locally elected Board of Management.
<b>Community Transport Providers</b>	Not-for-profit organisations providing community transport.
<b>Escort</b>	An adult who accompanies an IPTAAS patient while travelling to specialist health treatment and/or during their period of treatment.
<b>Economy Class</b>	The lowest travel class of seating in air transport and public transport.

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<b>Financial hardship</b>	<p>Patients or parents/guardians are considered to be experiencing financial hardship if they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• receive a Commonwealth Government pension or have a weekly income equivalent to or less than the maximum pension; or</li> <li>• are issued with a Commonwealth Health Care Card or Commonwealth Seniors' Health Care Card.</li> </ul> <p>Patients who experience exceptional financial difficulties but do not receive a Commonwealth Government pension or have a Commonwealth Health Care Card or Commonwealth Seniors' Health Care Card, may also be considered as experiencing financial hardship.</p>
<b>Patient</b>	The person claiming IPTAAS subsidies or a parent or guardian of a claimant under 17 years of age.
<b>Pre-approval</b>	<p>Pre-approval from an IPTAAS officer is required for all patients and their escort/s who are travelling by air.</p> <p>Pre-approval is not required for other forms of travel and/or accommodation.</p>
<b>Private Accommodation</b>	<p>Accommodation is private if it is in a private home, or the accommodation facility does not have an active Australian Business Number (ABN).</p> <p>Short term rentals listed on accommodation hosting sites such as Airbnb are considered private accommodation.</p> <p>If the accommodation facility (not the hosting site) has an active ABN, the accommodation will be considered for-profit accommodation. Evidence that the accommodation has an active ABN is required. This evidence must be an itemised tax invoice from the accommodation facility.</p>
<b>Recognised Specialist Medical Treatments</b>	The treatments provided by a specialist medical practitioner that are recognised by the Health Insurance Commission and listed in the Commonwealth Medicare Benefits Scheme for the purposes of Medicare benefits.

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<p><b>Specialist Medical Practitioner</b></p>	<p>A medical practitioner recognised as a specialist in a particular specialty for the purposes of the <a href="#">Health Insurance Act 1973</a> (Commonwealth) and recorded as such by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.</p> <p>A medical practitioner (including a registrar) employed as a specialist by the Commonwealth or State or by the proprietors of an approved hospital, where written confirmation of this specialist status is provided.</p> <p>A dental practitioner registered as an oral surgeon contracted to render oral surgery in the operating theatre of a hospital established under the <a href="#">Health Insurance Act 1973</a> (Commonwealth) and recorded as such by the Health Insurance Commission under code 102 – Dentist (Approved) (Oral Maxillofacial Surgeon) of the Medicare Provider File.</p>
<p><b>Third Party Organisation</b></p>	<p>A registered charity, not-for-profit or non-government organisation that provides a patient with financial assistance or organises travel and accommodation services.</p>

## **2. ELIGIBILITY**

### **2.1. Patients**

A patient is eligible for IPTAAS assistance if they are:

- a resident of NSW or Lord Howe Island
- enrolled with Medicare
- not receiving or eligible for financial assistance for travel and accommodation from a third-party insurance provider or other Commonwealth, State or Territory government schemes (this excludes private health insurance)
- referred for treatment at their nearest health service
- receiving treatment at an eligible health service
- travelling at least 100kms (one way) or at least 200kms in a week from their residence to the nearest eligible health service.

A patient is not eligible for IPTAAS assistance if they are:

- a NSW resident seeking medical treatment outside Australia
- not travelling from their usual place of residence to access specialised medical care
- a non-NSW resident seeking treatment in NSW.

Residency requirements are different for organ and tissue donors. An interstate resident is eligible for IPTAAS assistance if donating an organ or tissue to a resident of NSW.

NSW residents are not eligible if donating an organ or tissue interstate to an interstate resident. For further information about IPTAAS eligibility criteria, see the [IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines](#)

### **2.2. Escorts**

An escort is an adult who travels and/or stays with a patient and provides support during their treatment. A patient may be eligible to receive additional IPTAAS subsidies to support the travel and accommodation costs of an escort.

A patient can claim travel and accommodation subsidies for one escort without pre-approval, except for air travel. A patient may need to use commercial air travel for medical reasons to

access specialised health treatment. If this is the case, IPTAAS air pre-approval is required for both the patient and escort. For more information, refer to section 4.1.3 'Commercial Air' in the [IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines](#).

Escort pre-approval does not apply to children who are entitled to one escort automatically for commercial air travel.

A patient is eligible for two escorts if they are:

- an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person or,
- if they are under 17 years old and their health service confirms in writing that their condition is life threatening.



## **2.3. Third Party Organisations**

A patient may nominate to have all, or part of their IPTAAS subsidy paid to a Third Party Organisation. A Third Party Organisation is a registered charity, not-for-profit or non- government organisation that provides a patient with financial assistance or organises travel and accommodation services. A Third Party Organisation must be registered with IPTAAS to receive a subsidy. Below are examples of Third Party Organisations.

### ***Community Transport Provider***

Community transport providers may transport a patient to and from treatment. A patient may receive a subsidy if the community transport provider does not receive government funding.

If a community transport provider receives alternative government funding, the patient is not eligible to claim a transport subsidy, even if there is a cost to the patient for the service.

Patients may still be eligible for an accommodation subsidy.

Travel subsidies for eligible community transport are calculated using the public transport subsidy rate which is outlined on the [IPTAAS Website](#)

### ***Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services***

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services may assist an Aboriginal patient by transporting them to and from treatment. An eligible patient may nominate a service to receive all or part of their subsidy. The service will receive one subsidy per journey regardless of the number of patients they are transporting.

## **2.4. Eligible specialised health services**

### **2.4.1. Nearest specialist service**

A patient is eligible for IPTAAS if they access a specialised health service (identified in section 2.4.2) that is nearest to their usual place of residence in NSW, regardless of the State and Territory the service is located in. A visiting specialist or registrar who is employed as a specialist in a public or private hospital is considered the nearest available specialist.

Patients are eligible for IPTAAS if they are referred for treatment to their nearest eligible health service. Their general practitioner is usually the source of a referral, however, if a patient is not referred by a general practitioner, they may also be referred by practitioner types identified in the [IPTAAS Assessment Guidelines](#).

### **2.4.2. Eligible Specialist Services**

Eligible services for IPTAAS assistance include:

#### ***Recognised Specialist Medical Services***

These services are provided by a specialist medical practitioner who is registered as a specialist by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and listed as having a recognised 'specialty' or 'field of specialty practice' by the Medical Board of Australia.

Excludes treatment provided by general practitioners.

Provides treatment that is recognised by Medicare and if the services are on the Commonwealth Medicare Benefits Scheme

#### ***Allied Health Services***

An IPTAAS eligible allied health clinic that provides a highly specialised service.

#### ***Specific Oral Health Services***

Dental or orthodontic treatment associated with treatment of cleft lip and palate.

Oral surgery performed by an eligible dental practitioner in an operating theatre, where the patient is under general anaesthesia.

Provided by an eligible medical or dental practitioner whose registered specialty type is oral and maxillofacial surgery.

#### ***Highly Specialised Publicly Funded Oral Health Clinics in NSW***

IPTAAS eligible oral health clinics (also referred to as dental clinics) that are publicly funded and provide services such as endodontics, oral and maxillofacial surgery, oral medicine and pathology, oral surgery, orthodontics, paediatric dentistry, periodontics, prosthodontics, special needs dentistry.

#### ***Prosthetic or Orthotic Services***

Treatment provided by an eligible prosthetist or orthotist.

#### ***Ocularist***

Treatment provided by ocularists who are members of the Ocularists Association of Australia.

#### ***High Risk Foot Services***

Treatment by a high risk foot service that provides a level of care extending beyond a podiatry (only) outpatient clinic, involving a coordinated multidisciplinary approach that is led and coordinated by an experienced senior clinician.

#### ***Non-Commercial Clinical Trials***

Research investigations in which people volunteer to test new treatments, interventions or tests as a means to prevent, detect, treat or manage various diseases or medical conditions. Clinical trials are considered to be non-commercial if their sponsor is not a commercial company.

### *Voluntary Assisted Dying services*

Services to support a patient's access to voluntary assisted dying under the [Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2022 \(NSW\)](#), including services provided by practitioners undertaking roles under the Act.

#### **2.4.3. Ineligible health services**

Some types of services are not eligible for IPTAAS. These include:

- health screening
- general dentistry
- allied health services (except those identified in section 2.4.2)
- general practice (except services provided by approved practitioners under the [Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2022](#))

## **3. SUBSIDIES**

### **3.1. Travel**

IPTAAS subsidy rates for travel are in Appendix 7.1. The GST component of travel costs are not reimbursable. A patient will not receive a travel subsidy for emergency transport via an ambulance or aeromedical organisations.

#### **3.1.1. Advance travel**

Patients holding a valid concession card and experiencing financial hardship may apply for travel assistance before their appointment.

### **3.2. Accommodation**

A patient will receive a subsidy for eligible accommodation. Accommodation nights for single or multiple treatment periods accrue from the start of each financial year.

The GST component of accommodation costs is not reimbursable.

Different subsidy rates apply depending on the eligible accommodation type. In-patient hospital accommodation is not eligible. A patient may receive a subsidy for their escort's accommodation while they are an in-patient. IPTAAS subsidy rates for accommodation are in Appendix 7.1.

#### **3.2.1. Bulk billing**

Bulk billing occurs when an accommodation facility invoices IPTAAS directly for a patient's accommodation costs. A patient may be eligible to bulk bill their accommodation if they stay in an accommodation facility that is registered with IPTAAS as a Third Party Organisation.

### **3.3. Timeframes for submitting applications**

Applications must be submitted online or to an IPTAAS office within twelve months of the hospital discharge or appointment end date. A patient will not receive a subsidy for journeys outside of his twelve-month period, even if the patient meets the eligibility criteria.

### **3.4. Deceased patients**

Where a patient dies during treatment, IPTAAS may provide a travel subsidy to assist with the costs of transporting their body home. Escort travel may be available if a patient dies during treatment and the escort is on the return trip.

## **4. APPEALS AND COMPLAINTS**

### **4.1. Complaints**

EnableNSW and LHDs with IPTAAS offices are required to have a complaints management process in place. This should document appropriate avenues for resolving concerns raised by IPTAAS claimants. The process must include:

- a user friendly system for accepting complaints
- clear delegations and procedures for staff
- a recording system to capture complaints data
- performance standards including timeframes for response and quality of response
- routine monitoring and review of complaint trends
- regular reviews of complaints received to identify ways to improve service delivery.

### **4.2. Discretionary decision making**

LHDs must have a process in place to address appeals and may provide a discretionary payment if the application meets the discretionary criteria.

EnableNSW works with the Chief Executives of LHDs, who may exercise discretion if there are exceptional circumstances in which an applicant does not meet the eligibility criteria but otherwise meets the intention of IPTAAS.

A record of all discretionary decisions must be held and retained by EnableNSW or the LHD. Correspondence to the claimant must also note the reason why a discretionary decision was made.

To support consistency in decision-making, the Ministry will review unsuccessful appeals where the claimant believes there are exceptional circumstances.

EnableNSW and LHDs are to use the following principles when considering a claim that does not meet IPTAAS eligibility criteria:

- *Patient safety* – it is paramount to consider the safety of the patient in terms of the safety of the travel route, the clinically indicated need for continuity of care, mode of transport used and fitness of the patient to travel.

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- *Financial hardship* – consider the patient's experience of financial hardship and if travel to access treatment will cause significant financial burden.
- *Cultural needs* – apply sensitivity regarding the patient and their family's cultural needs.
- *Other sensitivities* – consider if there is a significant emotional or traumatic impact of the health condition, or a reason why the patient sought IPTAAS, that requires greater sensitivity in assessing the claim.
- *Precedent* – consider if there is a precedent supporting special consideration of the claim.

As IPTAAS has a limited budget, it is necessary to consider the impact of establishing precedents by making a discretionary decision. Most claims approved for payment should meet existing eligibility criteria, with only a small number of claims being considered for approval by discretion.

### 5. PRIVACY

All IPTAAS staff must treat all information provided in respect of a claim confidentially, and securely store this information.

All NSW Health staff must follow the [Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002](#) (NSW) and the NSW Health [Privacy Manual for Health Information](#).

### 6. ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

#### *NSW Ministry of Health*

The Ministry has responsibility for setting IPTAAS policy in line with NSW Government directions, providing funding to LHDs and EnableNSW, and monitoring performance of the scheme. This role includes:

- Reviewing and updating the IPTAAS Policy Directive as required.
- Facilitating communication between NSW Health, community agencies and key stakeholders on matters relevant to the IPTAAS Policy Directive.
- Monitoring the IPTAAS budget and establishing budgets for LHDs with IPTAAS offices and EnableNSW.
- Reviewing unsuccessfully appealed claims for discretionary approval.
- Determining eligibility for highly specialised Allied Health Clinics.
- Setting Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and monitoring performance of IPTAAS.
- Working with EnableNSW and LHDs to address IPTAAS underperformance.
- Increasing awareness of and promoting the use of IPTAAS.

#### *EnableNSW*

EnableNSW has responsibility for the operation of IPTAAS. This includes:

- Developing and reviewing IPTAAS procedural documentation and

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information on the scheme for patients and health care professionals.

- Where agreed, processing IPTAAS claims on behalf of LHDs.
- Overseeing IPTAAS operational processes.
- Ensuring that IPTAAS eligibility criteria are applied in a consistent and equitable manner across NSW.
- Providing training for IPTAAS staff as required.
- Reporting against KPIs for IPTAAS to the Ministry.
- Monitoring the uptake and overall cost of IPTAAS.

### *Local Health Districts*

The roles of LHDs vary depending on whether they operate a local IPTAAS office. All LHDs have responsibility for:

- Implementing and complying with IPTAAS policy and procedures.
- Supporting discretionary decision making.

LHDs who operate IPTAAS offices have the additional responsibilities of:

- Maintaining IPTAAS customer support and assistance function at the local level.
- Employing IPTAAS office staff.
- Processing IPTAAS claims.
- Providing training for IPTAAS staff as required.
- Working with the Ministry and EnableNSW to address areas of underperformance.