

# Victorian Medicare Action Group

## Bulletin #2

April 2003

### VMAG responds to Prime Minister.

The Victorian Medicare Action Group has expressed their alarm at the latest announcements by the Howard government to increase the Medicare rebate to provide free treatment to pensioners and the poor.

VMAG believes that this will undoubtedly lead Australia down the path of a two tiered, US style, health system. The major concern with this latest development is that it wipes out any remaining hope that universality will be maintained in relation to access to general practice.

VMAG suggested that a range of possible solutions exist. These include the provision of block grants to GPs who guarantee to bulk bill any patient who uses their practice, increasing the rebate to practices who totally bulk bill and extension of the network of Community Health Services which currently exists in Victoria.

At this stage both the Prime Minister and Senator Patterson have refused to meet with VMAG.

### The end for Medicare?

With the suggested changes to our health system free access to Doctors will no longer exist for all Australians, say experts. The Prime Minister has stated that Medicare was never intended to be for everyone and has suggested the following possible increases to the rebate to improve the steady decline of bulk billing.

*Inside is a full report on the latest activities of VMAG*

The proposed changes include the following increases to the Medicare rebate for Doctors who bulk bill pensioners and health care cardholders:

- Remote area Doctors will receive a \$6.30 incentive, rural Doctors will receive a \$5.30 incentive.
- Outer metro area Doctors will get a \$2.95 incentive.
- City Doctors will get a \$1.00 incentive.

Dr. John Deeble the architect of Medicare made the following comments,

***'Any alternative solution such as proposed incentives for GPs to bulk bill pensioners and health care cardholder's would be too messy and would prove inequitable'.***

Stephen Smith Labor Shadow Health Minister echoed these comments by stating

***'When John Howard announces his reforms to Medicare, it will lead to the destruction of Medicare as a universal system of health care for all Australians'.***

The VMAG agrees the with both Dr. Deeble and Stephen Smith in that such changes signal an end to our universal system of free access to Doctors for all Australians.

### ***VMAG's immediate focus:***

- Bulk billing, and
- Access to after hour's primary care.

VMAG's activities have been streamlined into four categories. They are:

- Community awareness
- Advocacy
- Local community development
- Research and analysis

## **Community Awareness.**

Since its inception in September, 2002, VMAG has grown rapidly and now consists of 82 members including community groups, churches, GP's community health centres, individuals, unions and local councils. Local interest groups are developing in key electorates, increasing community debate.

VMAG's first bulletin was published in January 2003 and was widely distributed. The group has also undertaken a range of activities. These include media releases, comments in metropolitan and local regional newspapers, medical journals and radio interviews.

A number of case studies and stories are being collated indicating the impact of the decline in bulk billing experienced by consumers. If you have a case study you would like VMAG to know about call Dean Griggs on 9230 4366.

Other key activities identified by VMAG to increase community awareness include: the development of a website, fostering the participation of community groups not directly part of the health sector, and identifying doctors who can liaise with the media about bulk billing issues.

## **Local community development.**

An important part of VMAG's overall strategy is to further expand and develop links with, local community organisations and groups. An important part of this strategy is the participation and support of local councils. They can help foster local campaigns with stakeholders such as Divisions of GPs, Community Health and other key groups. Darebin City Council, which has been involved in VMAG since its inception, has recently adopted the VMAG Key Message (see back page of this Bulletin) as their Council Position.

The Municipal Association of Victoria agreed to distribute information on VMAG to local councils throughout Victoria. There has also been strong interest in VMAG shown by a number of rural communities. Hopefully this will help with the further development of local groups, particularly in key electorates.

## **Advocacy.**

Over the last two months a number of meetings have been held with key members of Federal Parliament. These include Stephen Smith MP, Shadow Minister for Health and Ageing, and Senator Lyn Allison, Deputy Leader and spokesperson on health for the Democrats. Meetings are also occurring between VMAG, local interest groups and individuals and their local federal member of parliament. The VMAG has sent an open letter to the Prime Minister expressing our concern regarding the reform package to Medicare. The letter states the following:

***'We are extremely concerned that the proposals that have been suggested through the media by you, may in fact be implemented without any consideration of the views of the consumers of GP services'***

For a full copy of the letter contact Rod Wilson on 9429 1855.

After recent meetings and media attention, there has been a marginal shift in ALP policy in the direction recommended by VMAG. Furthermore, the Democrats and the Greens have both expressed interest in utilising information provided by VMAG to assist in policy development.

Meetings with State Government Ministers are being sought in order to assess the impact of the deteriorating federal health system on state services particularly emergency departments of hospitals. The Victorian Minister for Health Bronwyn Pike MP has agreed to meet with VMAG to discuss Medicare with the group.

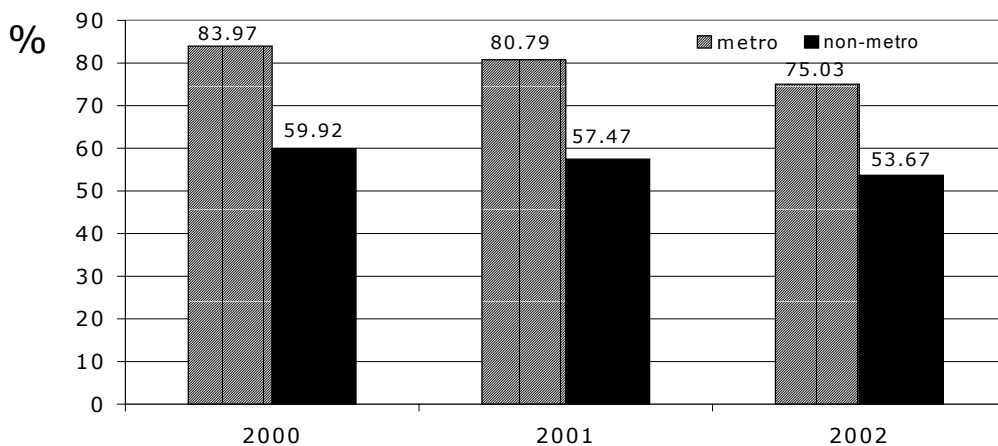
Funding to assist VMAG in its endeavours is being sought from a range of sources, including philanthropic foundations.

Other avenues to facilitate advocacy by VMAG include assisting individuals to write letters to their local MP's by providing a letter template, encouraging GP's to join VMAG and also submit articles to health journals, requesting meetings with key organisations and groups, including the AMA and ACTU.

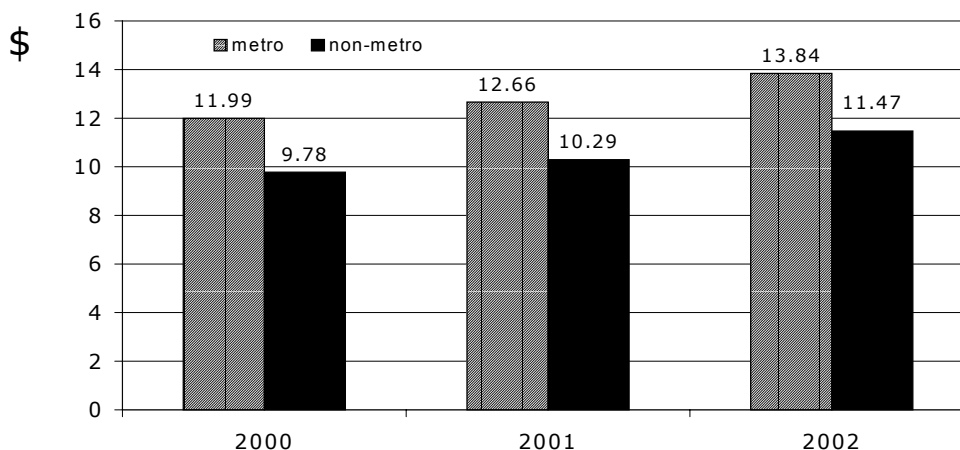
## Research and Analysis.

Discussions have been held with key policy advisers and academics related to development of policy solutions. A range of policy solutions are being developed by the group. The following figures detail changes both in bulk billed consultations and out of pocket costs in federal electorates in Victoria for each September quarter for the past three years. The electorates have been categorised into metropolitan and non metropolitan areas.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Bulk Billed GP attendances in Victorian Electorates September quarters 2000 – 2002**



**Figure 2: Average out of pocket expenses in Victorian Electorates September quarters 2000 – 2002**



Hanover Welfare Services and the Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Persons Program were successful in a submission to the Ronald Henderson Trust in securing funding to assess the accessibility of primary health care for those in risk of/experiencing homelessness. Anecdotal evidence suggests that clients are deferring medical assistance; continuity of care is being undermined, and the cost of medical care is increasing for disadvantaged households.

A paper published in the Australian Journal of Social Issues (Vol. 38, No.1, February, 2003) has examined Australians attitudes on tax and social spending. The researchers concluded that there is growing support for increases in taxes specifically targeted at improving public health care. For a précis of this article contact Carolyn Atkins at VCOSS on 9654 5050.

## The purpose of VMAG.

The Victorian Medicare Action Group is a coalition of community groups, health providers and non-government organisations concerned with the future of Medicare and, in particular, with the declining rate of bulk-billing for general practice.

On February 26<sup>th</sup> 2003, VMAG held a strategic planning meeting wherein the group's objectives were refined. VMAG objectives are to:

- Work as a coalition of groups to advocate for the future of Medicare
- Provide a forum for discussion about Medicare
- Raise awareness and encourage community debate about issues relating to Medicare
- Disseminate information about current trends
- Advocacy at a local, state and national level for a stronger universal health care system

Support research and analysis into the impact of changes to Medicare on the broader community and particularly groups such as low-income earners and rural communities.

## How to become involved.

The Victorian Medicare Action Group is a non-incorporated body that is open to anyone to join. You can register your interest and support by filling in the attached membership form and sending it to:

**Victorian Medicare Action Group**  
**283 Church Street**  
**Richmond 3121**

**Or email: [mmurray@iechs.org.au](mailto:mmurray@iechs.org.au)**  
**Or phone: (03) 9429 1855**

Becoming a member of the Victorian Medicare Action Group will ensure you are provided with information about forthcoming meetings and action that is being planned.

We encourage you to pass this information on to friends and colleagues.

For more information, please contact:

- Marilyn Beaumont at Women's Health Victoria 03 9662 3755  
[whv@whv.org.au](mailto:whv@whv.org.au)
- Rod Wilson at Inner East Community Health Service 03 9429 1855  
[rwilson@iechs.org.au](mailto:rwilson@iechs.org.au)

### VMAG - KEY MESSAGE

*Effective health services are fundamental to the wellbeing and development of the community. We support a universal health care system that is funded from taxation revenue. We believe public health policy should be driven by what is in the public interest, not by private profit or political ideology. It is wrong to make the quality of health care services dependent on what you can pay. Medicare should guarantee access to essential health services, via hospitals and GPs, for all Australians, regardless of how much we earn or where we live.*

### Victorian Medicare Action Group Membership form

I would like to become a member of VMAG

Name:.....

Organisation:.....

Postal Address:.....

Phone:.....

Fax:.....

Email:.....