

# Victorian Medicare Action Group

## Bulletin #4

[www.vmag.org.au](http://www.vmag.org.au)

August 2003

### MEDICARE DEBATE ROLLS ON

It seems only a short time ago that we at VMAG were attempting to start a community debate about Medicare. Since this time both major parties have released their policies related to Medicare and the community debate about it is well underway. The VMAG has been in the middle of this process and a major opportunity now exists for genuine debate about what kind of primary health care system the community wants. Some of the recent activities of the VMAG have included:

- A submission and presentation to the Senate Select Committee on Medicare. See full copy on our website.
- Documenting numerous consumer stories about problems individuals and families have accessing GP services.
- Providing information to politicians and journalists about these problems.
- Working with community networks in areas such as Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Darebin, Nunawading, Boroondara & Yarra, and Wyndham.
- Attending numerous public meetings throughout Victoria and canvassing issues related to the future of Medicare.
- Establishment of a web site which is now available for use by community groups and consumers.
- Receiving funding from The Reichstein Foundation to fund a part time Project Worker to assist communities in voicing their views about their GP and Primary Health Care services.
- Working with the Chronic Illness Alliance in publicising the findings of their recent report into the cost of being sick in country Victoria.
- Working with Medicare Action Groups in Queensland and NSW
- Encouraging Local Government and community health centres to provide leadership in their local communities.

Thankfully the discussion about bulk billing and GP practices has now taken on a life of its own and to a large degree no longer requires the work of the VMAG to keep it in the mind of the community.

Our focus will be increasingly on working with local community groups and providing information that is given to us from these Groups to both politicians and the media.

We are particularly keen for other organisations and individuals to join the VMAG and work with us in furthering ideas around development of health care services within our communities. If you would like support in developing your local network or to join VMAG please contact Maureen Murray 9429 1855 or email [mmurray@iechs.org.au](mailto:mmurray@iechs.org.au).

### VMAG PROJECT WORKER

The Victorian Medicare Action Group was pleased to receive \$30,000 in funding from The Reichstein Foundation. This funding allowed the Group to employ a part-time Project Worker. Successful applicant was Michelle Bolhurst. Michelle has a background in women's health and has worked as a health development officer at Women's Health East. Michelle has recently completed her Masters in Development Studies at the University of Melbourne and has a Bachelor of Arts as well as Health Sciences. Michelle will be assisting the VMAG with its numerous organisational tasks and will be resourcing networks in local communities throughout Victoria. Should you wish to contact Michelle please feel free to call her on 9429 1811 or email [mbolhurst@iechs.org.au](mailto:mbolhurst@iechs.org.au). We are sure Michelle will make a fantastic contribution to the life of VMAG and the many projects we are involved with.



#### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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# CONSUMERS STORIES

## "MAN BITES DOG"



### SEND US YOUR LOCAL PAPER MEDICARE CLIPPINGS

Some Members of VMAG have been sending us clippings of stories about Medicare from their local newspapers. These stories are most helpful and many other media outlets will follow up on them. If you see stories in your local paper which may be of interest please send them to us.

By Post: M Murray  
283 Church Street, Richmond 3121  
Or By Fax: 9429 8536  
Or email: [mmurray@iechs.org.au](mailto:mmurray@iechs.org.au)

### MEDICARE PUBLIC MEETINGS

Friday 5<sup>th</sup> September 5.30pm  
State Library, Cnr Swanston & Latrobe St  
Melbourne

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY  
MEETINGS OF THE VMAG AT  
283 CHURCH STREET RICHMOND LEVEL 3

Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> August 12.30pm  
Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> September 12noon  
Tuesday October 21<sup>st</sup> 12noon  
Tuesday November 25<sup>th</sup> 12noon  
Tuesday December 15<sup>th</sup> 12 noon

Any questions or comments?



We have been busy documenting stories of Consumers related to lack of access to GP services. Many of these stories have come from country Victoria. Some of the stories include the following: Email: [mmurray@iechs.org.au](mailto:mmurray@iechs.org.au)

A Melton woman drops a railway sleeper on her foot and **doesn't go to the doctor because of the \$54 fee**. Three days later a doctor tells her she has burst a major artery and is lucky to be alive.

Children with disabilities in a large **country town go without essential medication** because regular GP visits are too expensive.

A woman in an inner-city suburb has a mild asthma attack. **Her husband knows he can't afford a GP** so takes her straight to the hospital emergency department.

A mother of three in rural Victoria requests that her local clinic restores bulk billing **and is told to go to the hospital for health care instead**.

A respite foster carer pays \$55 out-of-pocket for a foster child's health needs in one weekend **and is unable to recover anything from Medicare**

Many of these stories have been used in Federal Parliament as a basis for questions and debate in Parliament.

### AUSTRALIAN HEALTH CARE SUMMIT

Members of VMAG have been invited to attend the Summit in Canberra on 17-19<sup>th</sup> August.

The summit will address four major areas:

- what principles do Australians wish to have underlie their National Health Scheme?
- introduction of the promised reform agenda into a new set of Australian Health Care Agreements to better support our public hospitals;
- how to better balance health promotion and health care; and finally
- to end the inefficiencies inherent in the current diversity of responsibilities at State and Federal Government level, the introduction of a new bureaucracy.

A report will be provided in the next edition of the Bulletin keeping you up to date on this issue.

# THE COST OF LIVING WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS IN RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA

Jo-Anne Tamlyn & Christine Walker  
Chronic Illness Alliance

In 2002-3 the Chronic Illness Alliance received funding from the Reichstein Foundation to survey the impact of living with a chronic illness in rural and regional Victoria.

The Alliance expected to receive some 100 completed surveys after distributing them through its member organisations but such was the response to the project and its aims that more than 400 surveys were returned. While we are still analysing the data, the preliminary results demonstrate a number of important issues for rural and regional people living with a chronic illness. One of these issue concerns access to General Practitioners. There were 381 households represented in the survey with 507 individuals with a chronic illness. Illnesses included: Crohn's and colitis, diabetes, cystic fibrosis, MS, cancer, asthma and depression. The Alliance found that of the 381 households, 41% had incomes less than \$26,000.00. While 65% of the households had access to a Health Care Card, only 35% of all the households had access to a bulk-billing General Practice.

During the focus groups people reported that lack of bulk-billing meant those who lived outside a regional centre had to make sure they attended a practice, during working hours, so they could pay the bill and get to the Medicare office to claim the rebate on the same day. This strategy had to be balanced with the need to take a day off work or to have children looked after and nicked in from school

Others reported that the lack of General Practice facilities generally in regional areas meant that they were kept waiting for appointments (in some cases weeks). One person reported that in her region, doctors were perceived as 'picking and choosing' who they would see, so that those who were 'nuisances' were told the books were full and they should find another practice. The survey revealed that households spend an average of \$19 per month on GP practices and an average of \$25 per month on Specialists. There was also an average of \$52 per month spent on PBS items, with 13% of the households saying that medications (both PBS and non-PBS) caused them major financial problems.

These were some of the expenses most people had and in some cases, the amount spent on health-related costs (including petrol, hospital stays, telephone and utilities) amounted to 21% + of their total incomes. Two thirds of people surveyed considered that the recent introduction of the GST had created further difficulties, while those whose income precluded them from a Health Care Card considered they were also extremely disadvantaged. Preliminary results of our survey show that regardless of a family's income, costs of chronic illness result in disadvantage and poverty.

Given these results, it is timely to ask how the Federal Government intends to assist people with chronic illness in rural and regional Victoria (and other areas of Australia), in a manner that assists them to optimise their health and their life's opportunities. When one considers the full range of costs people with chronic illness face, a comprehensive National Primary Health Care Policy is urgently needed.





## MUSOS FOR MEDICARE

The Victorian Medicare Action Group recently  
Held a meeting with a number of musicians  
and through this process have commenced  
a *Musos for Medicare Group*.

### THIS GROUP AIMS TO :

- Increase awareness of the declining access to health care services for marginalised groups within the community including musicians
- Promote support for the retention of tax payer funded health care services for musicians and the broader community.
- Provide information to other musicians about the need for them to become involved in the current debate about the future of health services in Australia.
- To promote this issue where appropriate with audiences and venue owners and other artists as appropriate.
- To take opportunities to speak with the media about the commitment of artists to this issue.
- Assist in events organised to promote the Group

The Group is being led by prominent Melbourne Musicians:

**Joe Chindamo Steve Sedergreen Martin Zakharov**

If you know anyone interested in being involved in this Group, please contact  
Maureen Murray on 9429 1855 or email: [mmurray@iechs.org.au](mailto:mmurray@iechs.org.au)

### TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE VICTORIAN MEDICARE ACTION GROUP

Organisation/Individual.....

#### Donations To The VMAG

Postal Address.....

Can be Made By  
Contacting: M Murray on  
9429 1855

Phone:.....

Fax:.....

Email:.....