

Victorian Medicare Action Group

Bulletin #5

www.vmag.org.au

November, 2003

Early analysis of MedicarePlus

The Commonwealth Government released their revamp of Medicare yesterday with the announcement of the MedicarePlus package.

VMAG continues to have grave concerns about how the package will improve access to affordable health care for most Australians, and its lack of commitment to ensuring universal bulk billing.

The following response is based on the limited information available within the Federal Government's press release of 18th November;

MedicarePlus will see decreased bulk billing: the Australian Medical Association agrees that the extra \$5 doctor's rebate for seeing patients with a health care card, or those under 16 years old is not enough to meet practice costs, and therefore will not encourage doctors to bulk bill. GP's are not going to return to bulk billing if it means charging less than they already are.

MedicarePlus offers no encouragement to GPs to achieve an optimal bulk billing rate (eg: 80%), so there is no incentive for them to bulk bill.

The package does not address the fundamental inadequacy of the amount of the rebate. It will therefore see a decline in bulk billing and an increase in up-front fees.

MedicarePlus still based on Commonwealth Government's ideological opposition to bulk billing: the package demonstrates the Commonwealth Government's continued commitment NOT to allow universal bulk billing.

MedicarePlus still offers real disincentives for consumers: despite safety nets, the package still requires consumers to produce up-front fees (to the value of \$500 for low-income families, and \$1000 for others), which will continue to see people choosing not to access GP services out of inability to pay. This is effectively an extra health tax.

Safety Nets set too high for health care costs of most consumers: \$500 for low income families and \$1000 for higher income families is much higher than most Australians will pay for their health care per year. The safety nets do not account for medications! They will be of little or no support to the vast majority of Australians.

MedicarePlus too complicated to be understood by consumers: how the safety nets will operate, who falls into the nets, and just how much people will have to pay for health care is very complicated. Australians are happy with Medicare; it is simple, easy-to-follow and equitable.

MedicarePlus requires too much organisation on consumer's behalf – in order to access the safety nets, consumers will have to be meticulous in their collection and accounting of medical receipts and expenses.

MedicarePlus does not improve distribution of GPs: the package does not address how increasing the number of doctors will result in them being equitably distributed to areas where a shortage of doctors exists.

The package does not address the need for better after hours and public holiday access to health care services.

MedicarePlus does not address practice inefficiency: the package does not address improvements in GP practice inefficiency which, in most practices, sees 50% of revenue spent on running costs.

Our analysis indicates it is doubtful the package will cost 2.4 billion over 4 years.

VMAG will continue to oppose a health system which does not provide **universal, equitable and affordable** health care for the whole Australian community.

VMAG is nominated for Outstanding Achievement Award.

VMAG was a finalist in the nominations for an award of Outstanding Achievement at the Primary Community Health Network's 2003 Awards for Innovation and Excellence in Primary Health Care, held at the Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre on October 16. The nomination demonstrated recognition for the important work VMAG is doing to promote primary health care throughout the Australian community.

Musicians Singing to be Heard

Musicians are “band-ing” together in their support for Medicare as an essential aspect of Australian life; one which ensures affordable, universal health care based on the health care needs of the community, not whether they have the ability to pay. A number of prominent Australian musicians have come together to form the **Musos for Medicare** movement, which will be officially launched on Thursday, 20th November.

Steve Sedergreen, well known pianist and owner of the Richmond jazz club, Dizzy’s, highlights that many musicians are often marginalised by the health system due to the hours they keep and the unique nature of their health problems, such as hearing deficit or the occupational hazards associated with lifting heavy equipment and tobacco-smoke inhalation at smoky venues. “In particular,” says Steve, “many musicians struggle to earn a living, and will continue to suffer worsening ill health if bulk-billing GP services continue to dry up”.

Steve has been a resident in Richmond for 8 years, and has played around Melbourne’s inner suburbs for even longer. He maintains that most Melbournians consider the live music scene to be an integral part of the city’s identity, however few would be aware of the health needs of musicians, and how the local music scene, and the industry in general, could be affected by the Howard Government’s proposed changes to Medicare.

“The Musos for Medicare hope to highlight to the Community and the Federal Government the important part musicians play in the Community, and the need for their voices to be counted in the Medicare debate”, adds Steve.

The launch of the Musos for Medicare group will be held this Thursday, 20th November at Dizzy’s Jazz Bar, 90 Swan St, Richmond, 3121, at 5.30pm, and will feature performances from Steve, Joe Chindamo, Savannah Blount, Leticia, Axle Whitehead and others. A new health service aimed specifically to address the health needs of musicians will also be introduced. Admission is free, and all are welcome.

CONSUMER MEDICARE CHARTER

VMAG is currently formulating a Consumer Medicare Charter this will articulate very briefly and clearly what consumers are telling us they want from their local primary health care system.

Some of the features of this include the;

- Development of a National Health reform Council which will address State / Commonwealth demarcation issues.
- Development of consumer based Primary Care Trusts which will hold funds from State & Commonwealth Governments
- More significant incentives for GPs to lift their bulk billing rates.
- GPs to be licensed to practice in particular communities to prevent over and under supply in different areas.
- More university places allocated for training of GPs, nurses and allied health workers

- Integrated Primary Health Care teams in every community.
- A stronger emphasis on Health Promotion
- A health care system which is measured by its outcomes, not based on how many patients are seen.
- A commitment from the Commonwealth Government to put \$500 million into Public Dental Services.
- A scrapping of the \$2.5 billion health insurance rebate, which has clearly not worked.

It is planned that these will be significant features of our Consumer Charter which will be endorsed throughout Australia by Consumer Groups.

If you would like to provide input into this Charter, then please feel free to email Project Worker, Chris Hagarty and let him know your thoughts, email: chris.hagarty@iechs.org.au

Happy Birthday VMAG

One year ago, in late October 2002, the first VMAG meeting was held. At that first meeting, very few people came together of to talk about how we could contribute to public debate about the future of primary health care services in Australia. We now have over 300 Members and have significantly affected health care policy. In many ways the objectives of that first meeting have been well and truly achieved. However, the opportunities are there for us to do a lot more. If you would like to become actively involved in VMAG and contribute to the debate about Primary Health Care Policy in Australia, please do not hesitate to contact us.

In the meantime, congratulations to all those consumers, people in local communities who have put a lot of work to ensure that the issue of access to primary health care services remains high in the public’s and politician’s thinking.

Consumers' Stories.

Accounts from throughout Victoria regarding consumers' experiences of, and difficulties in accessing health care, especially bulk-billing general practitioners, continues to form the backbone of VMAG's campaign to defend and extend Medicare for all Australians. The recent absence of a Project Officer at VMAG (now rectified) has slowed the collection of Consumer Stories for a short time; however this will soon be stepped-up again. It is clear through feedback from individual Federal MPs that these are an extremely effective campaign tool.

Please contact Chris Hagarty at VMAG if you wish to have your Consumer Story heard, or if you know of stories which need to be documented, phone 9429 1811. or email: chris.hagarty@iechs.org.au

Up-coming VMAG Meetings.

At: Level 3, 283 Church St, Richmond, 3121.

Tuesday 25th November, 12 noon.

Tuesday 16th December, 12 noon (tba)

Local Government and Medicare

Medicare is an important issue for Local Government. Increasingly Councils are undertaking activities to generate local awareness of the proposed changes to Medicare. Such activities range from public forums, submissions to the senate inquiry, local mapping of bulk billing, as well as discussions with local and federal MP's.

To assist Councils in these discussions and to increase peoples understanding of the proposed changes to Medicare the Local Government Medicare Network has been created. The Network is an email based group of interested Local Government staff who receive information about the latest developments in the Medicare debate.

The aims of the network are as follows:

To learn about what the proposed changes mean to local communities.

To discuss the role of local government in this issue.

To share stories about what has already been done by some Councils.

To share ideas for local action.

To find out more about the Network, contact Dean Griggs at the City of Darebin on 9230 4366 or dgriggs@darebin.vic.gov.au

Special Events

Public Forums

The Australian Fabian Society (Victorian Branch) and the Doctors' Reform Society invite you to attend a presentation in the Wednesday Night at the New International Bookshop Program;

Private Health Insurance: The Millstone Around The Neck of Our Public Health System: Strategies To Avoid Strangulation

Presented by DRS Secretary, Dr Tim Woodruff

- Wednesday, 19 November, 2003, 6:30 to 8:00pm.
- At the New International Bookshop Meeting Room, Trades Hall, Cnr Victoria and Lygon Streets, Carlton.
- Cost: AFS Members \$5, Non-Members \$6, Conc. \$4.
- For further information, email race@netspace.net.au, www.fabian.org.au or phone/Fax 9826 0104.

The Health Economics Unit at the Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University presents:

"Saving" the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme,

a seminar presented by Dr. Ken Harvey MB BS, FRCPA

- Wednesday 26 November, 2003, at 1.00 pm.
- At the RB Scotton Room, 2nd Floor, Neurosciences Building, Repatriation Medical Centre, Banksia Street, West Heidelberg, 3081
- The Seminar is free of charge and tea/coffee will be provided. For confirmation of your attendance and further information please contact: Gai Larkin ph: 9496 4434 or email gai.larkin@buseco.monash.edu.au

Bulk Billing Rates "Crash" Across Australia.

VMAG includes this data for its members to use as a tool for approaching local MPs, particularly in all electorates. It should be clear that bulk billing rates only show us half the picture. Bulk billing rates offer us a figure of bulk billing in proportion to the total number of general practice consultations, and do not indicate the number of total consultations. We know there were 3 million less visits to GPs last year than the previous year. What we don't know is where and who this affected most. VMAG is working with Federal Politicians to obtain data which is more indicative of the 'real' health care picture.

Thankyou to Women's Health Victoria for producing this data for VMAG.

Victorian Federal Liberal Party Electorates

Electorate	Bulk Billing Rates		% Change over 36 months	Member
	Mar-00	Mar-03		
Aston	85.70%	73.10%	-12.60%	Chris Pearce- Wantirna
Casey	75.90%	63.50%	-12.40%	Tony Smith- Croydon
Corangamite	58.30%	42.30%	-16.00%	Stewart McArthur- Belmont
Deakin	80.60%	66.60%	-14.00%	Phillip Barresi- Mitcham
Dunkley	78.40%	49.60%	-28.80%	Bruce Billson- Frankston
Flinders	71.30%	47.80%	-23.50%	Greg Hunt- Hastings
Goldstein	73.20%	57.80%	-15.40%	David Kemp- Bentleigh
Higgins	75.50%	63.30%	-12.20%	Peter Costello- Armadale
Indi	42.60%	30.10%	-12.50%	Sophie Panopoulos- Wangaratta
Kooyong	71.60%	61.70%	-9.90%	Petro Georgiou- Camberwell
LaTrobe	79.30%	62.80%	-16.50%	Bob Charles- Boronia
McEwen	73.50%	62.10%	-11.40%	Fran Bailey- Healesville
Menzies	80.10%	71.40%	-8.70%	Kevin Andrews- Doncaster
Murray	41.20%	31.00%	-10.20%	Sharman Stone- Shepparton
Wannon	55.50%	46.80%	-8.70%	David Hawker- Hamilton

Victorian Federal Labor Party Electorates

Electorate	Bulk Billing Rates		% Change over 36 months	Member
	Mar-00	Mar-03		
Ballarat	66.70%	43.80%	-22.90%	Catherine King- Ballarat
Batman	92.80%	85.10%	-7.70%	Martin Ferguson- Preston
Bendigo	53.00%	49.00%	-4.00%	Steve Gibbons- Bendigo
Bruce	86.30%	77.10%	-9.20%	Alan Griffin- Mulgrave
Burke	71.20%	59.40%	-11.80%	Brendan O'Connor- Kyneton
Calwell	94.50%	83.00%	-11.50%	Maria Vamvakinou- Broadmeadows
Chisholm	84.10%	74.80%	-9.30%	Anna Bourke- Box Hill
Corio	70.10%	58.50%	-11.60%	Gavan O'Connor- Geelong
Gellibrand	94.30%	87.10%	-7.20%	Nicola Roxon- Footscray
Holt	91.70%	77.10%	-14.60%	Anthony Byrne- Dandenong
Hotham	88.30%	79.10%	-9.20%	Simon Crean- Clayton
Isaacs	85.40%	67.90%	-17.50%	Ann Corcoran- Cranbourne
Jagajaga	77.70%	70.90%	-6.80%	Jenny Macklin-Heidelberg
Lalor	91.30%	79.30%	-12.00%	Julia Gillard- Werribee
Maribyrnong	92.20%	83.70%	-8.50%	Bob Sercombe- East Keilor
McMillan	68.30%	68.90%	0.60%	Christian Zahra- Moe
Melbourne	89.70%	81.40%	-8.30%	Lindsay Tanner- Carlton
Melb Ports	84.30%	71.80%	-12.50%	Michael Danby- St Kilda
Scullin	91.10%	87.10%	-4.00%	Harry Jenkins- Bundoora
Wills	91.00%	80.90%	-10.10%	Kelvin Thomson- Coburg