

Victorian Medicare Action Group

Bulletin #6

www.vmag.org.au

March, 2004

Bulk Billing to Plummet Fees to Rise *-MedicarePlus*

On Wednesday 10th March, the Federal Government announced that it had struck a deal with the four Independent Senators, and the *MedicarePlus* package had been passed in the Senate.

In passing the package, the Independent Senators negotiated a number of alterations to the initial *MedicarePlus* package. VMAG believes that the Government's claim of the new package improving access to GP services for most Australians will not be realised.

- An extra \$2.50 (on top of the \$5 previously promised) has been added to the Medicare rebate for GPs in rural areas and in Tasmania, to bulk bill children under 16 years and Concession Cardholders. Most rural Victorian communities have been experiencing GP shortages for many years, and very few bulk billing services exist in these areas. Most GPs are currently charging fees in excess of \$10 above the Medicare rebate. It is unlikely, therefore, that GPs will begin bulk billing these patients, as to do so would effectively result in their accepting a reduced income.

- The lowering of the Safety Nets to \$300 for families who qualify for Family Tax Benefit A, and \$700 for everyone else will assist a small number of families, particularly if they attend medical specialists, however few families will visit the doctor enough to access the safety nets, and will therefore have to pay up-front fees every time they go to the GP.

VMAG believes those people who do not have available income will not be able to pay the up-front doctors fees, and will therefore have to seek medical care in a public hospital emergency department, or miss out all together. *MedicarePlus* does not address how people will access GP services if they cannot afford the up-front fees. \$300 or \$700 is a lot of money for many people in our community.

The administration and implementation of the Safety Nets is unclear. A Safety net is only required when a system is broken - why not fix the system? Will the Health Insurance Commission or the patient be

responsible for keeping track of whether the Safety Net has been reached? How much of the health care dollar will be allocated to this enormous administrative task? Many patients are unsure of whether or not they qualify for Family Tax Benefit A, and therefore which Safety Net they will be eligible for.

MedicarePlus does not put a ceiling price on GP and Specialist service charges. This creates inflationary pressure as practitioners increase their fees to take advantage of the Safety Nets, leaving those with lower incomes even further disadvantaged when attempting to access health care services.

Medicare coverage for up to three dental visits will benefit only those people suffering from a "chronic or complex condition", where the dental complaint results from, or is adding to that condition, and then only if the treatment is



Courtesy The Age

requested by a GP. This proposal does nothing to address the dental problems of the wider community, nor does it commit to oral health promotion, or the prevention of dental complications.

This proposal fails to even come close to replacing the \$200 million worth of funding which the Federal Government slashed from public dental services upon achieving office in 1996.

- Medicare coverage of selected Allied Health services, such as psychologists and physiotherapists, will only be available to those clients with "chronic or complex care needs", who are being managed by their GP as part of a multidisciplinary care plan, under the Enhanced Primary Care Program. GPs are extraordinarily reluctant to implement these plans as they require excessive time and administrative effort. *MedicarePlus* offers no added incentive for GPs to initiate these care plans, and it is therefore unlikely that many patients will be able to access these Medicare-funded Allied Health services.

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Bulk Billing GP Investigated

One of regional Victoria's last, totally bulk billing GPs is constantly inundated with patients who can't afford to go anywhere else. Now finds he is being investigated by the Health Insurance Commission for seeing too many patients. Not only are Medicare rebates for GPs in regional areas insufficient to allow GPs to practice, those who do try to offer affordable, universal services are being forced to stop doing so. Soon there will be no totally bulk billing services outside of the Melbourne Metropolitan area. VMAG invites GPs to contact us if they too are having difficulty keeping up with the demand on their services.

MP to Address Local Medicare Group

The Federal Member for Kooyong, Petro Georgiou has agreed to attend a public discussion on Medicare. This will take place on **Wed 14th April, 5.30pm, at the Boroondara Community Health Centre, 378 Burwood Rd, Hawthorn.** All are welcome.

Doctor's fees leave mother with no control over family's health

Kate is a single mother of three children, each with unusual treatment and medication needs. She was forced to change GP clinics last year after their family doctor in Hoppers Crossing began charging fees, but she eventually found a bulk billing clinic 30 minutes drive away. Kate was apprehensive about her kids seeing a new doctor at first, but grew to trust that he was familiar with her children's complex medical conditions. After 4 months, however, due to the bulk billing clinic becoming so popular, she was no longer able to choose which doctor her children could see. Kate despairs that her inability to pay for doctors' fees means that her family are denied the right to choose quality medical care.

Bulk Billing to Plummet, Fees to Rise – MedicarePlus.

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VMAG welcomes the Government's recognition that its original *MedicarePlus* package was insufficient to meet the neglected health needs of the Australian Community, however this new package still falls considerably short of meeting those needs. Of major concern is its lack of commitment to Universality, and its inability to address the health needs of those who cannot afford to pay up-front doctors' fees.

It is imperative that Australians voice these concerns to their local MPs, and throughout their local communities. As we approach the Federal Election, we need to ensure that we do not lose the right to access medical services when we need them, rather than when we can afford to pay.

VMAG Makes Submissions to Parliamentary Inquiries.

In early February, the Senate Select Committee on Medicare once again rejected the Federal Government's *MedicarePlus* package as advocating for Medicare as a welfare system only, and not as a "universal insurer that should deliver equal benefits to all Australians alike".

With the reconvening of the Senate Select Committee in November, 2003, VMAG and many of its member organisations were invited to make submissions regarding the *MedicarePlus* package.

In February, VMAG also made a submission to the *Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Examining the Impact on the Victorian Community and Public Hospitals of the Diminishing Access to After Hours and Bulk Billing General Practices.*

These submissions may be viewed at www.vmag.org.au.

VMAG Calls for Consumer Stories

VMAG receives regularly requests from the media for stories of Consumers who have experienced difficulties in accessing GP services. If your group has recorded some of these stories in your area, or if you know of anyone who has a story to tell about being unable to access medical care (maybe even you, yourself), please forward them to us, or let us know.

We need these to ensure Consumers' voices are heard in the Medicare debate. Contact Chris or Maureen, (03) 9429 1855.

Community Forum on Medicare

Wednesday 31st March at 7pm

Eastern Access Community Health, 46 Warrandyte Road, Ringwood

It is a crucial part of the VMAG Strategy to hold meetings in marginal electorates over the coming months in the lead-up to the anticipated Federal election.

A number of prominent speakers have been invited, including the Labor Candidate for Deakin, Peter Lynch, representatives of the Australian Democrats and the Greens, representatives from Women's Health East, The Doctors Reform Society and local health care providers. The Federal Member for Deakin, Hon. Phil Barresi was also invited to speak, but has declined.

The Forum will highlight the changes that are occurring in the community in relation to the provision of GP services in the context of the broader Medicare Debate, and facilitate discussion around these.

VMAG encourages all its members to accept this opportunity to attend the Forum, and to contribute to the debate through sharing their health care experiences. Further information about the Community Forum can be obtained through Maureen Murray, ph: (03) 9429 1855, or via www.vmag.org.au.

Pharmaceuticals – How much will YOU pay?

A VMAG policy statement on the Australian Government's Fair Trade Agreements with the Government of the United States of America.

The Australian Government recently completed negotiations with the Government of the United States of America regarding a Fair Trade Agreement on the supply, availability and public financing of international pharmaceutical products in Australia. The outcomes of these negotiations may have a profound effect on the Australian Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which is responsible for ensuring pharmaceutical products are affordable and accessible for all Australians.

The Fair Trade Agreement negotiations centre around the PBS' ability to set the price of pharmaceuticals at that of the cheapest available, generic product. This prevents pharmaceutical manufacturers from being able to set their own prices for their products, and thereby prevents inflationary public health spending. The Government of the USA has attempted to negotiate the alteration of this price-controlling mechanism on the grounds that it creates an unfair trade environment for US-based pharmaceutical companies. If the USA is successful, the cost of

pharmaceuticals for consumers may increase dramatically (in excess of 90% - Australia Institute).

While being primarily concerned with the long-term viability and restoration of Medicare, VMAG expresses concern regarding this Fair Trade Agreement, which threatens to hamper the PBS' ability to deliver affordable pharmaceuticals to all Australians.

VMAG supports the PBS and believes its mechanisms are effective in controlling inflation with regard to the cost of pharmaceuticals, and in ensuring the equitable availability of pharmaceuticals for all Australians. VMAG does not advocate for any alteration to the PBS which threatens to disadvantage the Australian community, and **instead calls for further legislation and political commitment to strengthen the PBS** and guarantee affordable pharmaceuticals for all Australians

VMAG urges the Australian Community to be concerned about the possible erosion of their PBS as a result of the Fair Trade Agreement between the governments of Australia and the USA, and urges everyone to discuss their concerns with their Federal Member of Parliament.

Consumer Medicare Charter

The National Coalition of Health Consumer Groups, of which VMAG is a member, has released its *Consumer Medicare Charter*. It is envisaged that The Charter will act as a clear and easily understood tool with which to present to politicians, the media and health care policy developers, and will demonstrate a united approach to protecting and restoring our universally accessible and equitable health care system.

The *Consumer Medicare Charter* has been developed to highlight what health care consumers want from their primary health care system, and does so in a manner which offers positive alternatives to the Commonwealth Government's inadequate, *MedicarePlus* package.

Individuals and organisations across Australia who are concerned about the future of Medicare under the Federal Government's proposals, should endorse *The Charter* by signing it and returning it to the National Coalition of Health Consumer Groups. Copies of The Charter and details of where to send it can be obtained on the VMAG website (www.vmag.org.au), or by contacting VMAG on (03) 9429 1855.

CONSUMER MEDICARE CHARTER

VISION

The establishment of a comprehensive integrated, accessible and affordable primary health care system, which will ensure that all community members will have access to vital primary health care services, regardless of their income, or where they live.

Bulk Billing and Attendance Data Withheld.

This page of the VMAG Bulletin would normally feature the latest Commonwealth Government, quarterly bulk billing, out-of-pocket expenses and attendance data, presented as per Victorian Federal Electorate. This data is produced by the Health Insurance Commission, and is accessed by VMAG through its political networks.

However, the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Mr Tony Abbott, has recently announced that bulk billing figures by Federal Electorate will only be released annually, not quarterly, as per the norm.

VMAG will be unable to access this official information until February, 2005 (presumably after the next Federal Election). VMAG is undertaking its own research regarding the prevailing bulk billing trends in light of the new *MedicarePlus* package. The results of this will be released soon.

In the meantime, VMAG encourages you to phone or write to your local, Federal MP, and ask;

If *MedicarePlus* is so beneficial to the Australian Community, why are you withholding the quarterly bulk billing and attendance data by Federal Electorate, which would instantly prove its success?

The following lists the contact details of Victorian Federal MPs to assist you in this endeavour (* denotes Government MPs);

House of Representatives			
Electorate	Name	Phone:	Email:
Aston*	Chris Pearce	9887 3890	Chris.Pearce.MP@aph.gov.au
Ballarat	Catherine King	5338 8123	Catherine.King.MP@aph.gov.au
Batman	Martin Ferguson	9416 8690	M.Ferguson.MP@aph.gov.au
Bendigo	Steve Gibbons	5443 9055	Steve.Gibbons.MP@aph.gov.au
Bruce	Alan Griffin	9547 1444	Alan.Griffin.MP@aph.gov.au
Burke	Brendan O'Connor	5422 2711	Brendan.O'Connor.MP@aph.gov.au
Calwell	Maria Vamvakinou	9309 3655	Maria.Vamvakinou.MP@aph.gov.au
Casey*	Tony Smith	9724 9222	Tony.Smith.MP@aph.gov.au
Chiselm	Anna Burke	9898 0675	Anna.Burke.MP@aph.gov.au
Corangamite*	Stewart McArthur	5243 8766	Stewart.McArthur.MP@aph.gov.au
Corio	Gavan O'Connor	5221 3033	Gavan.O'Connor.MP@aph.gov.au
Deakin*	Phillip Barresi	9873 8351	Phil.Barresi.MP@aph.gov.au
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Flinders*	Greg Hunt	5979 3188	Greg.Hunt.MP@aph.gov.au
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Gippsland*	Peter McGauran	5144 6744	Peter.McGauran.MP@aph.gov.au
Goldstein*	David Kemp	9557 4644	D.Kemp.MP@aph.gov.au
Higgins*	Peter Costello	9822 4422	Peter.Costello.MP@aph.gov.au
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Hotham	Simon Crean	9545 6211	S.Crean.MP@aph.gov.au
Indi*	Sophie Panopoulos	5721 5377	Sophie.Panopoulos.MP@aph.gov.au
Isaacs	Ann Corcoran	5995 2905	Ann.Corcoran.MP@aph.gov.au
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Kooyong*	Petro Georgiou	9882 3677	P.Gerogiou.MP@aph.gov.au
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