

Victorian Medicare Action Group

Press Release: (4th May, '04)

Call for State Budget to fund Community Health, after hours GP services to assist struggling Hospital Emergency Departments this Winter.

As State Government funding for Community-based health services once again falls short of the need this winter, the number of Victorians attending hospital emergency departments for winter-related ailments such as influenza and colds will escalate to a record high.

The handing down of the Victorian State Budget today has seen increased funding directed to public hospitals, with particular emphasis on reducing surgical waiting lists, however there have been limited provisions for improving community-based health services such as allied health (eg: physiotherapists and podiatrists), dental and mental health services, all of which work to improve the health of the Community **BEFORE** they are forced to seek care in the public hospital system.

Mr Rod Wilson, the Convenor of the Victorian Medicare Action Group, which comprises over 300 members from community groups, community health centres, local government, public health policy institutions and religious and welfare organisations throughout Victoria said, "Failure to address funding short-falls to Community-based services will continue to result in people having to go to hospital this winter, as they will not be able to receive the care they need at the early stages of illness; the care which might prevent worsening symptoms and hospitalisation".

"Victorian public hospitals, and particular emergency departments, are already under tremendous strain due to the ongoing shortage of bulk-billing GP services," says Mr Wilson. "This new budget, far from trying to alleviate this problem by better resourcing Community-based health services, will see even greater numbers of Victorians flocking to hospitals to receive treatment."

"The Victorian Medicare Action Group calls on the State Budget to immediately fund bulk-billing GP practices to open after hours," Mr Wilson says. "At present, most State-funded Community Health Centres close their doors at 5pm. Opening them after hours would be a simple way to use the existing resources and infrastructure to provide necessary community-based health services, and would have a major impact on reducing the load on hospital emergency departments."

"As the Victorian State budget stands at present, health service consumers will be the losers this winter as they struggle to access affordable health care services. While promised tax cuts may provide families with a few dollars extra each week, this will not make health services magically appear in the Community, so they will be little better-off in terms of their health", Mr Wilson said. "All the tax cuts in the world are useless if there is nothing to spend your money on, and that's what many communities are facing in terms of health care services."

“In addition to a short-fall of services,” Mr Wilson said, “any benefit for families through tax cuts will be swallowed-up by rising out-of-pocket expenses with each visit to the doctor or health worker. Consumers will find themselves more and more disempowered in terms of choosing quality health care as the weather gets steadily cooler, and their health care needs increase”.

For further comment on the State Budget, please contact;

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