

# ***Victorian Medicare Action Group***

***Press Release: (27<sup>th</sup> April, '04)***

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## ***Health Service Consumers alarmed, but not surprised as the cost of MedicarePlus continues to rise.***

Consumer groups are alarmed, but far from surprised, at the announcement this week that surgeons will exploit loopholes in the *MedicarePlus* package to restructure their fees, thereby ensuring that tax-payers are forced to prop-up expensive specialist services.

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 that consumer advocacy organisations like the Victorian Medicare Action Group had frequently forwarded correspondence to the Federal Government, the Senate Select Committee on Medicare and the Independent Senators before the introduction of *MedicarePlus*, warning them of the likelihood of rising GP and specialist fees if the package were passed.

“On repeated occasions,” adds Mr Wilson, “we sought a meeting with the Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott, to inform him of this likely development. He refused, and now it appears that neither he, his staff, nor the Independent Senators have looked at *MedicarePlus* with any of the thoroughness that the public would expect”.

“What this highlights is that Australians need a health insurance system which is proven in its ability to ensure universal access to high quality health care services for all Australians, and which manages to keep public health spending manageable. Medicare as we know it, the Medicare of the 1980s and 1990s, is that proven system.”

“By introducing *MedicarePlus*, the Federal Government and the Independent Senators have irresponsibly ignored a key provision of the original Medicare; the management of GP and specialist fee structures so as to ensure the cost to tax-payers is incurred only through the Medicare levy (tax). The result, as we’ve seen this week, will be rising fee structures for GPs and specialists, and higher Government spending than anticipated.”

Mr Wilson calls for a health system which sets reasonable, scheduled fees for GP and specialists services, and which ensures consumers receive the care they need. “If GPs and specialists choose to charge above these scheduled fees, they should do so without being able to access any tax-payer funded reimbursement. This prevents the need for “safety nets” from which GPs and specialists take a bit from here, and a bit more from there. This is how to manage an affordable, effective health system, and ensure quality health care services are accessible by all Australians, when they need them.”

Mr Wilson again calls on the Minister for Health And Ageing to meet with health service consumers and advocacy organisations such as the Victorian Medicare Action Group, to listen to the effect that the *MedicarePlus* package is having on The Community’s ability to access health care services, and to discuss Federal Government health policy options to improve this.

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