



Hunter General Practitioners Association

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HPGA in the Media

Doctors say an ongoing Medicare rebate freeze will squeeze out those who can't afford care

14/5/2016

HPGA Chair, Fiona Van Leeuwen, has been interviewed by the Newcastle Herald: *"FAILING to recognise the valuable work done by family doctors and their teams will squeeze out those who can't afford to pay for care, Hunter GPs have warned.*

The federal government's plan to continue the Medicare rebate freeze for another two years is a short-sighted way of addressing budgetary issues and makes no economic sense when compared to the much higher costs of the impacts of unchecked chronic disease on the community, doctors say.

Chairwoman of the Hunter General Practitioners Association, Hamilton GP Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, said governments on both sides of politics have been heading in the same direction for a long time.

"Our main concern is that freezing the Medicare rebate is just an acknowledgement by the current government that general practice care in Australia is rushing head-long into a user pays system," she said.

"General practice care is recognised globally as being the most efficient way to implement preventive and acute large-scale population health care and there's been a lot of discussion about that but unfortunately this budget doesn't properly support general practice systems to provide those things."

GPs provide increasingly complex, but vital preventive health care such as screening for cancer and chronic disease risk factors for diseases like diabetes and heart diseases, she said.

"There's an enormous focus these days on chronic disease management. It's complex, it requires multiple visits and it's ongoing and if it's really well-managed it prevents extraordinarily costly interventions down the track, and not only cost savings - it allows people to have much better quality of life, so as a community we cannot afford not to pay for quality

primary care.”

The association is working with peak bodies and other grassroots organisations to help get their message across to the wider community. Some GPs have already signed up to deliver warnings long with prescriptions by way of an anti-Medicare rebate freeze flyers. The material was originally developed by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners in late 2014 to protest the initial rebate freeze, according the Medical Observer, but has not endorsed its use in this campaign.

“We are worried about people who can’t afford to pay or general practice care, and about the inefficient use of money by spending it too late,” Dr Van Leeuwen said.”

Chair of the Hunter GP's Association speaking with 1233's Jill Emberson

31/8/15

Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen is chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association.

She spoke to 1233's Jill Emberson about the rise in bulk-billed home visit services – [click on the link to listen to the interview](#)..

Rise in urgent home visits sparks MBS blowout

16/7/2015

As reported in [Australian Doctor](#), "*The cost-effectiveness of after-hours care has been called into question in the Hunter Medicare Local region, NSW, after a dramatic rise in claims for urgent after-hours home visits. The increase follows the introduction of the new Doctor To Your Door service in May last year. The company bulk-bills for emergency night-time home visits from 6pm and charges \$400 per visit after midnight. Since the service opened, the region's claims for MBS item 597, which attracts a rebate of \$129.80, have almost tripled from \$393,338 in the second quarter of 2014 to \$1,074,363 in the third quarter. This compares with costs of about \$200,000-\$300,000 per quarter since the start of 2012. Over the same 2014 quarter, there was only a 15% rise in 597 rebates for urgent after-hours home visits nationally...vice-chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association, Dr Fiona van Leeuwen, has questioned the cost-effectiveness of the model. Dr van Leeuwen said the federally funded GP Access After Hours service, for which she works, had long met the region's after-hours needs through its five clinics that bill under non-urgent MBS items 23 (\$37.05) and 36 (\$71.70)...“I can't see how suddenly people require a whole host of after-hours care. I suspect needs haven't changed but usage has.” She said that while she did not want to be critical of Doctor To Your Door, in general, alternative after-hours models of care might not be using Medicare funds efficiently. “...the health dollar is precious, and we need to decide how we spend it.”*

Threat to GP Access After Hours

15/5/2015

As published in [The Daily Telegraph](#), 'The Hunter Medicare Locals GP Access After Hours Service, which has provided after-hours care for 50,000 patients a year, said it would wind up next month because its funding has run out. A spokesman for the minister said the funding for the service would be provided to the new PHN in the area. [Hunter GP Association chair] Dr Tony Isaac is one of about 250 GPs rostered to provide after-hours care out of five clinics attached to hospitals in Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. "The collapse of the service would be a disaster for health care in our region," he said.'



Threat to GP Access After Hours: Dr De Lyall interviewed on 1233 ABC Newcastle

14/5/2015

On 14th May 2015, a steering committee member of the Hunter GP Association, Dr Steve De Lyall, was interviewed on ABC 1233 Local radio. He spoke to Jill Emberson about the imminent threat to the GP Access After Hours Service. [Click on the link](#), and fast forward to 12 minutes and 22 seconds to listen to the interview.

Rebate freeze battle 'not over'

23/3/2015

As quoted in [Medical Observer](#), 'Dr Tony Isaac, chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association, said members of the 170-member group were more concerned about the indexation freeze than they had been about the co-payment proposals the government had been forced to drop. "We think it's a co-payment by stealth," he said. "It will be unviable for GPs to continue to bulk-bill, so the government will get what they wanted." Dr Isaac said with the traditional GP business model likely to become unviable, some practitioners have started talking about introducing payment tiers for patients; for example, by distinguishing patients on a health card who have some income from those who don't. Most at risk were solo practitioners who lacked economies of scale.

"These are the guys traditionally with big patient loads on lower incomes in rural towns," he said. "But GPs are pragmatic people. A GP who is bulk-billing 40 people a day could shift to seeing just 20 patients a day and private billing, and make the same money. But there would be 20 patients who are not being seen...It is another example of how primary healthcare needs to be supported...And GPs will have more of a battle selling [the cost shift] to the community."

"Doctors concerned about freezing of Medicare payments"

8/3/2015

The Maitland Mercury has reported that, "*Hunter doctors have welcomed the federal government's decision to scrap the \$5 GP co-payment. But they fear that costs of running a medical practice will rise under plans to freeze the Medicare rebate for the next four years and lead to the end of bulk billing... Hunter General Practitioners Association chairman Dr Tony Isaac said the group remained concerned about the government's intentions for Medicare. He said many doctors wondered whether there would be further attempted attacks on general practices in the near future. "While we applaud the government's position to drop the proposed \$5 co-payment, we remain concerned about the freezing of Medicare rebates for the next four years because this will effectively mean a co-payment by stealth," Dr Isaac said. "This will happen because the costs of running a practice – staff costs, rent, electricity, insurances– will continue to rise over the next four years, but income will not if the GP continues to bulk bill. Practice viability will be reduced until the doctor decides to either close the practice or change their business model to impose a fee on everyone, effectively ending bulk billing."*

Read [the full article here](#).

"Co-payment lambasted at Senate hearing"

Medical Observer has reported on the Senate Select Committee on Health public hearing, "*The inquiry also heard from six GPs concerned about the lack of consultation with the profession before the co-payment detail was announced in the budget. Giving evidence in person and in one case via teleconference from Tasmania, all agreed that the proposed changes would destabilise primary healthcare. "Seeking to contain costs by providing price signals via increased co-payments will not achieve either cost containment or health outcome goals, especially where such measures disproportionately weaken primary care," said Professor Andrew Bonney, a GP from Culburra Beach, NSW, and Professor of General Practice at the University of Wollongong. "My experience anticipates that the result of increased co-payments will be reduced access for those most in need of care, later presentations of illness and unplanned admissions to hospitals with ensuing higher healthcare costs." Professor Bonney also said that a co-payment would send most patients directly to hospital and create barriers for Indigenous patients. **The vice-chair of the Hunter General Practice Association, Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, suggested there was already a reticence from patients to see their GPs following the co-payment announcement.** Dr Ian Kamerman, the past president of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia, who practices in Tamworth NSW, said if bulk-billing was eliminated he was unsure how he could keep his practice functioning."*

Read [the full article here](#).

"Abbott's Medicare mess"

12/2/2015



Channel Ten news has reported on the Senate Select Committee hearing, including a sound bite from our own Dr Colin Pearce, of Charlestown Square Medical Practice.

Watch [the video here](#).

"Co-pay will force practices to close, warn GPs"

12/2/2015

Medical Observer is leading with a report about the Senate Select Committee on Health public hearing. *"Last week, front-line doctors went before the Senate Select Committee on Health to issue fresh warnings about the move to cut \$5 from attendance item rebates for non-concession card holders and freeze MBS indexation. **Dr Colin Pearce, medical director of Charlestown Square Medical Centre, in Newcastle, NSW, told the inquiry it was a "tipping point". "We need our practices to be viable. If there is little or no profit in owning a practice, then they will close. Then there will not just be a shortage of GPs but an extreme shortage in the infrastructure." He said if practices shut down, governments would have to step in and fund infrastructure to ensure "delivery of GP care". Dr Pearce offered a stark insight into the effects of the indexation freeze and rebate cuts. For a bulk-billing practice with 50% non-concessional patients, a typical FTE GP would see gross billings drop by \$25,600 this year, he said. With the cumulative effects of the indexation freeze, this loss would rise to \$32,500 next year and \$39,500 by 2017. Senators were told that practices faced a choice between offering multidisciplinary care with nurse and allied healthcare teams or "going back 25 years" with a GP working alone. Doctors at the Senate hearing also said GPs fees would have to increase but the impact would be far greater than the \$5 co-payment being pitched to voters by the government...Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, vice-chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association, said: "I've been in general practice for 15 years now. I desperately want to focus on my clinical activities. That is what I'm trained for. But I need to think about money." The fears being expressed by doctors are reflected in modelling carried out by the Grattan Institute. The institute's director of health programs, Professor Stephen Duckett, said the increase in co-payments was likely to be in the range of \$30-\$40 for a standard visit if practices were going to recoup the losses."***

Read [the full article here](#).

"Hunter GPs lobby Canberra to ditch Medicare cuts"

8/2/2015

The ABC news website reported that, *"The Hunter General Practitioners Association says it is hoping the federal government is serious about consulting with doctors on the future of its health reforms...Association vice-chairwoman Fiona Van Leeuwen said the changes are not a good move. 'I think consultation is the answer, and I guess we here locally really aim to work diligently towards good access for our community to quality GP care,' she said. 'We really want to build, and be apart of building, the sustainable health system that we can all rely on. We stand behind our community and we wish to support you, and that's why we're going (to Canberra).'"*

Read [the full article here](#).

"Hunter GPs challenge Medicare co-payment in Canberra"

8/2/2015

Published in the Newcastle Herald, *"MEMBERS of a grassroots group of Hunter GPs have made their mark in Canberra where they fronted on Thursday to speak to their submission to the Senate Select Committee on Health. The three members of the newly-established Hunter General Practitioners Association were well-received, says chairman, Dr Tony Isaac. The doctors, who are the backbone of the region's vital after-hours service, GP Access After Hours, are perplexed about why GPs are being targeted by the Federal Government with proposals such as Medicare co payments when then are already so cost-effective...The submission went on to say that GPs were more than willing to contribute to the process of finding solutions but they needed to be asked."*

Read [the full article here](#).

HGPA witnesses to the Senate Select Committee on Health - Video

8/2/2015

0 Comments



Dr Colin Pearce, Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, and Dr Richard Terry have witnessed to the Senate Select Committee on Health in Canberra on 6th February 2015. The full video of their testimony, as well as downloadable copies of their submissions, can be found on [the HGPA "Copayment" page](#).

HGPA radio interview - ABC Newcastle 1233

5/2/2015

HGPA vice-chair, Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, was interviewed on ABC Newcastle 1233 on 5 Feb 2014, just as she was about to enter the Senate Select Committee on Health public hearing. When she took the call, Fiona (along with Dr Colin Pearce and Dr Richard Terry), were madly dashing around to find the right entrance to the Senate - which explains the audible tachypnoea...

You can listen to the MP3 of the interview on the [HGPA news page](#).

"DELEGATION OF HUNTER GPS HEADING TO AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL"

6/2/2015

Dr Fiona Van Leeuwen, Vice-Chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association, has been interviewed on NBN TV news about the the Hunter General Practitioners Association.

Watch [the video online here](#).



"Hunter GPs welcome government backflip on consultation rebate"

18/1/2015

Published in the Maitland Mercury 16 January - *"The government announced yesterday that it had scrapped its plan to cut the \$20 Medicare rebate for GP consultations shorter than 10 minutes. Medical professionals across the nation had criticised the plan because of the flow-on effect it would have, either leading to increased traffic in hospital emergency departments or more people needlessly living with poor health. Hunter General Practitioners Association president Tony Isaac said yesterday's announcement was welcome news for Hunter GPs. He said the cut to the rebate would have resulted in higher costs for people to visit GPs and would have led to more people presenting to emergency departments for treatment of minor health problems... "It's great that the minister is back consulting with doctors," he said. "We are still worried about the freezing of indexation and we're still worried about a \$5 co-payment."*

Read [the full article here](#).

Didn't like a \$7 GP Co-payment? Say hello to Abbott's new \$25 GP-Copayment

15/1/2015

Dr Tony Isaac, chair of the Hunter General Practitioners Association (www.huntergpa.org) was interviewed on 1233 ABC Radio this morning about the impending Medicare rebate changes. He pointed out that whilst most Australian think there will be a \$5 GP Co-payment coming from 1 July 2015, for many patients there will actually be:

(a) a "\$20 GP-Copayment" from 19 Jan 2015, rising to...

- (b) a "\$25 GP-Copayment" from 1 July 2015, rising to...
(c) a "\$25+ GP-Copayment" indexed through to 1 July 2018.

[Click here to see why.](#)

"Patients will suffer: GPs step up anti-rebate campaign"

14/1/2015



Medical Observer has published an article reporting that "ANGRY GPs are stepping up their campaign against looming Medicare rebate cuts, warning general practices will be forced to close and patients will suffer under the government's proposed policy...Dr Tony Isaac (pictured), chair of the newly formed Hunter General Practitioners Association, said politicians needed to understand the intended savings from the move would not eventuate."

Read [the full article here](#).

Over 100 Hunter GPs meet over GP co-payment

14/1/2015

"The Hunter region's GPs are warning the Federal government's changes to Medicare rebates will make many local practices unviable. The **Hunter General Practitioners Association** last night hosted a meeting to discuss the impact of the move... Association chairman Tony Isaac said..."The savings [the Federal Government] think they're going to be making by these changes are going to be lost because patients are not going to be presenting for preventative health care. They're going to be living in poorer health and presenting later so that the only options at this later stage is for patients to have more expensive, hospital-based care..."

Read [the full story on ABC news online here](#).

"Hunter GPs unite against Medicare changes"

13/1/2015

An article published in the Newcastle Herald states, "THE federal government's changes to Medicare will hurt the 'most vulnerable' and make practices unviable, says Dr Tony Isaac chairman of a newly formed Hunter GP group. The Hunter

General Practitioners Association was officially launched on Monday night at Charlestown, with more than 100 doctors turning out to discuss how the changes to Medicare rebates will affect general practice. 'Our concern is for the patients,' he said. 'The cost alone will really threaten people and the most vulnerable. People will wait until their too sick to ignore it anymore and need more expensive interventions.'

Dr Isaac said that the GPs decision to start up the new association was prompted by Hunter Medicare Local's transition into a Primary Health Network - which means it will have to look after a much larger geographical area. He said they would be giving doctors a local voice...'We need an organisation that can represent local general practice in the face of direct challenges to our practices and our patients.'

Read [the full article here](#).



Tony Isaac. Picture: Jonathan Carroll

