



NEWS RELEASE

Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd.

03/27

13/5/2003

Federal Budget 2003/04: Medicare Package needs major surgery

The Government's Medicare Package needs major surgery in order to deliver all Australians fair access to GP services, according to Australia's largest GP group, the Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP).

"The centrepiece of the Government's health budget, the Medicare Package, is a lost opportunity to revitalise general practice," said Dr Rob Walters, ADGP Chair.

"The message we are getting from GPs, responding to our survey on the Medicare Package, is that the small carrots are not enough for them to risk being hit over the head with the very large sticks. Clearly, a lot more work needs to be done before this package is acceptable to GPs or to the community.

"This Package relies on GPs to continue to shoulder the burden of the costs of health care for the Australian community. It provides inadequate support for GPs to bulk bill the 40% of GP consultations provided to concession card holders and requires GPs to continue to subsidise the cost of providing services to the "working poor" who do not qualify for health care cards.

"The Government is asking us to bulk bill self-funded retirees on \$80 000 a year and yet continues to rely on the altruism of GPs to bulk bill low income families with children with chronic illnesses, who do not qualify for a health care card but who may have difficulty affording GP services.

"GPs in the city, who care for the majority of the 7 million Australians on health care cards, will only receive an extra \$1 per consultation if they bulk bill all their concessional patients. This is inadequate to meet the rising costs of running a practice.

"GPs are also being asked to subsidise after hours services and home visits provided to health care card holders. If GPs are being asked to bulk bill these services, they will need increased support from the Government.

"The small carrots in the Package, such as the increased GP numbers, additional funding for rebates and more practice nurses, are simply not enough to address the serious pressures facing GPs.

"The Package also does nothing to reduce the cost of medical specialist services, typically much higher than those charged by GPs.

"The Government is requiring GPs to agree to bulk bill concession card holders as part of this package – why not also require medical specialists to bulk bill their concessional patients? This would genuinely make Medicare fairer for everyone.

"ADGP urges the Government to listen to the concerns of GPs and work with the GP groups to improve the Package so it can deliver a stronger primary health care system for the community," Dr Walters said.

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Other Budget measures

Increased focus on prevention

ADGP supports the increased focus on prevention in the Budget. GPs play an important role in preventing disease in the community and the Budget initiatives should support GPs in this role.

In particular, ADGP welcomes the funding for primary health care providers to work together to improve the health of the community. Divisions of General Practice will play a key role in delivering this initiative. ADGP also welcomes funding to strengthen the role of GPs in health promotion.

Immunisation

ADGP is disappointed that the Budget does not include funding for additional vaccines to be added to the Australian vaccination schedule. This means that families will have to pay more to protect their children against serious diseases, such as chicken pox and whooping cough.

In particular, ADGP is disappointed that there is no funding provided to extend the vaccine program to include the Chickenpox vaccine at 18mths and 13 years, an adult booster dose of pertussis (whooping cough) for 15-19 year olds and a lowering of the age for the Older Australians Flu vaccine to 50 years, from the current 65 years. These measures would reduce the incidence of serious and debilitating diseases and their impact upon the community.

ADGP is also disappointed that the Government's Meningococcal C vaccine program targeting 15-19 years olds is only available through schools and not through GPs. Many young people in this age group do not attend school and so will miss out on being immunised against this life-threatening disease.

ADGP urges the Government to consider providing funding for young people to be immunised against Meningococcal C disease through general practice, to ensure that all people in this high risk age group can access this vaccination program.

Quality use of medicines program - EDQUM

ADGP welcomes the continuation of the Enhanced Divisions Quality Use of Medicines (EDQUM) program. EDQUM is an important program that assists GPs to achieve higher standards of quality prescribing and better patient health outcomes. Divisions of General Practice participating in EDQUM have been using their own funds to support this program.

This Budget measure will enable Divisions to continue to support GPs to adopt evidence-based best practice prescribing to achieve maximum benefits for their patients and the community.

Other issues

ADGP is disappointed that the Budget has not delivered on some key priorities for general practice, raised by ADGP in our Budget submission. None of the following important issues ADGP have been addressed by this Budget:

- support for GPs working in aged care homes, including funding to increase computerisation in aged care facilities to enable GPs to access patients' health records and transfer data to their practices;.
- a primary care early childhood agenda to strengthen the role of general practice in early childhood;
- a national allied health program run through Divisions to increase access to allied health services for all Australians; and
- funding for the restructure of the Medicare Benefits Schedule to support more complex, longer GP consultations.

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