

Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Danielle McMullen on Today, Monday, 15 August 2022

Subject: Bulk Billing and GP shortages.

ALLISON LANGDON: There are growing fears this morning patient care is being put in jeopardy as an increasing number of doctors drop bulk billing.

GPs say they can't afford to operate under the current Medicare model, prompting a billing shake up. For more, we're joined by the AMA Vice President, Dr Danielle McMullen, from Townsville. Nice to see you this morning. I mean, nationwide, this seems to be a pretty big problem.

DR DANIELLE MCMULLEN: It certainly is. We've seen that over the time that Medicare has existed, it used to be that the Medicare rebate for a usual consult covered costs of providing that care, and we now find that that Medicare rebate covers less than half of the cost of running a consultation. And so GPs across the country are just saying that enough is enough, we just can't afford to keep our doors open and work under those bulk billing arrangements.

KARL STEFANOVIC: There seems to be a little bit of conjecture over just how many, or how few now bulk bill. Do you have a rough idea? I mean, the paper's saying 30 per cent, doctors are saying 60 per cent. At the end of the day it means that people in poorer areas are having to fork out more and that's tough.

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: It is. We know that about two thirds of patients are bulk billed all of the time, but we expect that that number will drop and it is hard to quantify. We do do our best to make sure that our most vulnerable patients have minimal out of pocket costs. But at the end of the day, they're also small businesses and we are urging Government to take heed of that and to work with us to make sure that general practice remains sustainable so that we can take care of the patients across the country.

ALLISON LANGDON: And I assume with this you're going to have that knock-on effect. If someone can't get in to see their GP if they don't bulk bill, then they're probably going to, what, perhaps present at the hospital? Or put more strain on our hospital system?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Exactly, Aly. And what we've seen over COVID-19 is that plenty of people delayed care because it was difficult, or they were nervous about going out in the community. And so we're already seeing more chronic and complex cases turning up to our general practices, turning up to emergency. So we really need to invest in being able to spend longer with our patients. We know that time with your GP means we've got time to manage those multiple issues, those complex issues, and trying to minimise how unwell people get, and obviously minimise hospitalisations. But it's really about making sure that the patients across Australia, people of Australia have time with their GP and have their health managed comprehensively and capably, and plenty of time with their GP.

KARL STEFANOVIC: So what's going to fix it?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: We have heard encouraging signs from the new Health Minister - I do think he gets it. And we do have things like there's a strengthening Medicare taskforce that'll be working together by the end of the year to have some solutions. Now it won't fix general practice and the challenges facing us overnight, but we are hopeful that there will be steps taken to make sure that we modernise Medicare and make it easier to see your GP and get the time with them that you need to manage your health.

ALLISON LANGDON: Aren't you also having an issue with getting new graduates to go into private practice? To become GPs?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Of course, with all this discussion about how difficult it is in general practice we have unfortunately seen a really shocking statistic that only 15 per cent of graduating medical students are interested in a career of GP, and we really need that to be more about 50 per cent. So we do have work to do in this sector to advertise really that, despite the challenges, it is a fantastically rewarding career. And being able to take care of multiple generations of people, really getting to know your patients and walking with them through their health challenges, is actually a really rewarding career and one that I love. And I'll be out there spruiking it as well.

ALLISON LANGDON: Good to talk to you this morning, doctor. Thank you.

KARL STEFANOVIC: Thanks, doctor.

15 August 2022

CONTACT: 02 6270 5478 0427 209 753 media@ama.com.au

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