

Transcript: AMA President, Professor Stephen Robson on ABC news, Tuesday April 24, 2023

Subject: Professor Steve Robson refutes pharmacy claims two-month dispensing will lead to medicine shortages.

ABC PRESENTER CASEY BRIGGS: Pharmacists say a proposal flagged by the federal government to double the supply of medication provided with each prescription could leave patients without access to life saving drugs. The proposed changes to medication dispensing would allow patients to receive a 60-day supply. Pharmacists around the country have been airing their concerns, claiming this will exacerbate medication shortages. AMA President, Dr Steve Robson, though, disputes shortages will be any worse under the proposed changes.

STEVE ROBSON: These are medications that people are taking anyway. All we're really doing is saying that over the course of a year you need to go to a pharmacy six times to pick up a supply of medication rather than 12 times. So it shouldn't really alter the amount of medication dispensed. In fact, it might make it easier because in any given month, only half as many people will be coming into pharmacies to get their prescriptions. So it's a thing that we don't really think is a real issue.

CASEY BRIGGS: Can we talk a bit about these medicine shortages? Because some of them certainly do exist. Where are the shortages and what kinds of drugs are we lacking in supply?

STEVE ROBSON: It's a really good question. And I think over the pandemic it has become clear that Australia is at the end of a very long logistic chain. So we've seen a lot of medications, everything from antibiotics to other things become difficult to source. Now, most of the time we've been lucky and there have been substitutes or different doses that you can put together. But that's a very separate issue to what we're talking about here and the supply difficulties of importing medications are things that I guess the government needs to think about, strategic stockpiles and so on. What we're talking about here is just a change in the pattern of dispensing. So it shouldn't have any further effect on the more long term issues around obtaining medications for Australian patients.

CASEY BRIGGS: We've heard from the Pharmacy Guild today saying they've got pharmacists who are needing to turn away people who are presenting with scripts because they don't have the drugs in stock. That's where they're saying they're concerned about this doubling of scripts might come from. Is that a widespread problem? Are you hearing much of that from, you know, noting that you represent GP's and doctors here, not the pharmacists, but presumably if that is happening, some of that feedback would be coming back through to GP's?

STEVE ROBSON: Yeah, it's not a thing we're hearing. I think the thing we're hearing is that actually being on a number of medications is really expensive and for lots of Australians,

the most vulnerable Australians, Australians with chronic health conditions, it's a huge part of the cost of living pressure that we're facing. So taking out of the equation having to pay for prescriptions every second month is likely to be a big factor. And the other thing that often Australians who don't have these problems don't realise is that for many people it is actually difficult getting to a pharmacy. You need to get a cab or have your carer take you. There are lots of challenges, so this is going to remove a lot of the challenge and make life a lot easier for many, many vulnerable Australians. It was recommended by the Government's own body, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, several years ago now, and the can was kicked down the road. But we're delighted that the Minister has finally listened to that advice and is acting on it. And as the PBAC has said, we think it's likely to make life a lot better for many, many Australians.

CASEY BRIGGS: So yeah, the Government floated this proposal. That's one way of reducing potentially the burden of costs and inconvenience on patients. I guess the other big burden for people that need to take a lot of pills, take a lot of drugs, have complex conditions, is the cost of these things. Do you think there's more that could be done to reduce the cost of medicines to the individual?

STEVE ROBSON: There are a lot of things that we could potentially do. One of the things that people don't recognise is that many pharmacists probably want to offer a further discount to patients and do the right thing by a lot of their patients, but they're regulated the maximum discount they can give as a dollar. We think that's something else the Government could look at in time, but at the moment we're delighted the Minister has taken the advice. We think this is going to be a huge step forward for millions of Australians who have chronic health problems that require medication and we fully support this. It's a great way forward.

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