

Transcript: AMA President, Professor Steve Robson, at the press boxes at Parliament House Canberra. Wednesday, 10 May 2023

Subject: AMA reaction to the May 2023 federal budget

AMA PRESIDENT PROFESSOR STEVE ROBSON: I'm Steve Robson, Federal President of the Australian Medical Association. Around the country, Australians have understood that our health system is in crisis and that affordable and accessible care with GPs has been very difficult to find and it's getting worse. So we absolutely welcome to light a lot of the initiatives in this Budget.

We knew that primary care and general practice needed long-term reform and we're delighted to see initiatives and funding that put general practices at the heart of long-term reform and build the teams around them that can provide care for Australians with complex and chronic conditions.

What we said for long-term reform to work, we needed immediate resuscitation or there may be no primary care health system left. We absolutely welcome the enormous injection that we've seen tonight in funding to immediately make healthcare and general practice visits affordable and accessible to the most vulnerable Australians.

We've also seen funding for things the AMA have been taking to the Government. We've asked for funding for longer Telehealth consultations. We've asked for funding for longer in-person consultations. We've asked for better funding models for wound care. All of these things have been listened to and we're delighted the Government has responded with funding.

We knew tonight had to be a healthcare budget, and we're delighted that the Government has listened to what we have been saying to them for a long time now. There are also other important incentives and initiatives tonight, like making medicines more affordable for Australians, vaping, all sorts of initiatives. So it has been a health budget tonight. The Government has listened to the AMA's requests and we're very, very happy tonight. I'm happy to take some questions.

QUESTION: Tripling of the bulk billing incentive, that goes further than you're asking for, doesn't it?

STEVE ROBSON: Yeah. We know that many Australians with chronic and complex problems have enormous difficulty getting affordable healthcare. The incentives and the tripling of the bulk billing incentive, for example, tonight is going to make it a lot easier for practices around the country to provide that care to the vulnerable patients they want to look after, so we absolutely welcome it.

QUESTION: You asked for a doubling of incentives, didn't you?

STEVE ROBSON: Yeah. Well, look, we think the Government has responded in a way that is going to make it much easier to provide the care that vulnerable Australians need, so we absolutely welcome this tonight.

QUESTION: How many more doctor surgeries do you think will now offer bulk billing as a result of this?

STEVE ROBSON: We think that, around the country, there are practices everywhere that want to provide affordable and accessible care for vulnerable Australians, but they couldn't make it financially work. The incentives we've seen announced tonight in this Budget are going to make it much easier. So we think that this is going to be just a great thing for the Australians who need it most.

QUESTION: The Treasurer has said on these measures that this is something that will apply to middle Australia - this is how the Government is trying to provide relief to middle Australia. You've talked a lot about vulnerable patients. How much of that incentive increase do you think will lead to bulk billing being offered across the board, not just to those vulnerable patients and their children?

STEVE ROBSON: So when I talk about vulnerable patients, I talk about patients with chronic complex health conditions who have to see their doctors a lot, and if they can't access general practice, have no other option but to go to our emergency departments and our public hospitals. There are millions of people with these conditions and I think every family will know people who fit this category and who find it difficult to afford medicines and difficult to get accessible, affordable healthcare. So we think this is going to have a very broad effect across the country for many millions of Australians.

QUESTION: Will it save bulk billing for everybody?

STEVE ROBSON: I think we know that general practices want to provide affordable, accessible care and these measures tonight, as announced tonight, are going to make that much easier. So I think it's a very strong signal that the Government values general practise and wants to make care affordable for the Australians who need it most.

QUESTION: What do these measures mean for regional staff shortages?

STEVE ROBSON: We know that people in regional and rural Australia have enormous challenges in accessing health care. One of the key things is the workforce and we know that only a small proportion of new medical graduates look to general practice as a viable career.

We think the sort of investment, both in the [audio skips] long-term we've seen in the budget tonight could go a long way to turning that around and making general practice a much more attractive career path for recently graduated doctors, which is going to pay off dividends in the long term.

QUESTION: Do you think there will be enough in the Budget for GPs to be able to service-get enough GPs to service bulk billing 11 million people?

STEVE ROBSON: So we know that the journey that Australia has to take to fix the health system is a long and difficult one, but it starts with a single step. And I have to say we've seen a number of great strong first steps tonight. So we think it's a signal that this Government takes primary care and Australia's health very seriously.

QUESTION: But there might be more needed?

STEVE ROBSON: It is a long journey and there's plenty to do. But what we're seeing tonight is very, very welcome. And I think general practitioners around the country will welcome this like we do.

QUESTION: There's no extra money for public hospitals. The AMA's been campaigning strongly for that. Are you disappointed?

STEVE ROBSON: We recognise that there is system reform required in Australia, but it's really important to understand that public hospitals have to deal with patients if they either have inaccessible primary care and general practice and get sick or if they can't access primary care. So we anticipate increasing funding and support for general practise will take a lot of pressure off our emergency departments and hence our public hospitals Cool. Thanks, everybody.

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