

Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Danielle McMullen, Outlet: ABC TV News, 19 June 2023

Subject: AMA support for 60-day dispensing and release of Pharmacy Guild report

HOST: LORNA DUNKLEY: Dr Danielle McMullen is vice president of the Australian Medical Association and joins us now live. Good morning, are these measures really necessary?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: I think the most important thing to remember about these measures is that they will halve the cost of medicines for many Australians across the country, particularly people on low income and healthcare cards and pensioners who missed out on the last cut to medicines prices. So we do think it's really important policy change to help people deal with the cost of their regular medicines, give them easier access to medicines and stay on their medication, because we all know people who've run out of their medicines don't get back to the pharmacy or back for another script and then just fall off of their regular medicines, which obviously isn't good for their health. So it is definitely sensible health policy, which is good for patients, and it's now about time to make it work.

LORNA DUNKLEY: Not so good for the pharmacies, according to them. Six hundred pharmacies could shut, 20,000 jobs lost. Do you acknowledge that data?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Look, we've had an initial look at their report this morning, and we'll obviously have a more detailed look over the coming days, as I'm sure will government. We do have questions about some of the assumptions that are made in there. There's differing modelling about how widely this policy will be taken up because we do need to remember that the longer dispensing interval is at the discretion of the usual doctor who will have a conversation with patients about whether it's appropriate for them to have the longer dispensing interval. And certainly, I know that from my own patients, if it's a new medicine or their condition's been a bit unstable, they'll be sticking with 30-days. And it's really only those most stable of patients where the 60-day dispensing makes sense.

LORNA DUNKLEY: Okay. Another concern of pharmacies is that this will lead to a shortage of some medicines that are vital to people. Do you not see that happening?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Now that side of their argument, the medicines shortages issue, has been widely debunked, and we think it's unfair on patients actually to still be holding this scare campaign. I've had patients come into my office panicked because they've been told that they won't be able to get their medicine next month because of this policy change. Now, that's patently untrue. The policy doesn't come in place for some months yet, and actually this doesn't change how much medicine goes out the door. Patients will still be on the same amount of medication. It's just a timing interval. There are some medication shortages in Australia at the moment, but that's an entirely separate issue to the 60-day dispensing, and we think it's unfair that patients are being made to feel scared about their medicine supply when this change will have no impact in the longer term on those shortages.

LORNA DUNKLEY: As you will very well be aware, pharmacists offer a lot of services. Some include free community health services which people rely on. If you're potentially losing pharmacists over this issue and pharmacies closing as they say will happen, you are losing services ultimately, aren't you?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Pharmacies do play a vital role in our community, and particularly in rural and regional areas we know how much communities rely on their pharmacists. And I do as a GP, I talk to our community pharmacists every day and we work in collaboration for patient care, so we certainly want to see pharmacists be able to actually spend more time with their patients, get out from behind the dispensing counter. We've heard from pharmacists themselves that this will free up their time to be able to spend more time on medicines, medication reviews, things like dose administration aids or Webster packs. The government has announced that all of the savings they make and more will be reinvested back into community pharmacy. So we need to be having conversations about exactly how that reinvestment will work to make sure that we can support community pharmacy to remain open and to provide those vital services to patients. But that shouldn't be getting in the way of what is a really important, valuable medicines policy change that will save Australians vast sums of money.

LORNA DUNKLEY: As you say, it's a policy at the moment. it's being discussed. All sides of the argument will come out. What's your hope for a timescale for this where your patients, other patients can see that 60-day dispensing?

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: We hope that they stick to schedule. As it is, this is a staged rollout over the next 18 months, so there will already be patients that still need to wait another 18 months for their medicine to be half the price that it is now. I think that's expecting patients to wait long enough. This was a recommendation from 2018, so there has been plenty of time for this to be put into action. As soon as possible we need to be saving Australians money, so we'd certainly hoped that government can keep to schedule on their announcement.

LORNA DUNKLEY: Dr Danielle McMullen from the AMA, thank you.

DANIELLE MCMULLEN: Thanks.

* * End * *

19 June 2023

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

Follow the AMA Media on Twitter: http://twitter.com/ama_media

Follow the AMA President on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/amapresident>

Like the AMA on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/AustralianMedicalAssociation>
