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NEW FIGURES SHOW IMPACT OF YEARS OF MEDICARE FREEZE

Figures released today by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) show the impact that several years of freezing Medicare patient rebates have had on the cost of providing health care, AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today.

Dr Bartone, a GP, said that general practice remains a highly accessible part of the health system, with a relatively small number of patients delaying visits to a GP due to cost.

“However, the Medicare rebate has failed to keep up with the increasing costs of providing medical services,” Dr Bartone said.

“While bulk billing in general practice remains high, it does not paint the full picture. Only around two-thirds of patients have all their visits to a GP bulk billed.

“These growing out of pocket costs reflect the impact of Medicare indexation freeze policies implemented by successive Governments, with Commonwealth funding to support patients who need to see their GP stagnating.

“The last Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2018 showed that Australian Government total expenditure on GPs services per person grew by just 80 cents between 2015-16 and 2016-17 - from \$370.60 to \$371.40.

“The fact that the AIHW report shows the median out of pocket cost was \$142 per person, despite the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) being frozen for five years, shows that doctors – be they GPs, other specialists, pathologists, or radiologists – try to limit out of pocket costs.

“When it comes to specialist treatment under private health insurance, Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority (APRA) figures show that more than 88 per cent of all procedures are performed with no out of pocket costs to patients, and a further 7 per cent are performed with an up-front gap of less than \$500.

“While the current Government has commenced a slow thaw on indexation, it has not undone the damage of several years of freezing Medicare rebates that commenced in the 2013/14 Budget under Labor and was continued until recently by the Coalition.

“And we know that, for the most part, diagnostic imaging and pathology rebates will remain frozen, as they have for the past few decades.

“The key message from the Super Saturday by-elections is that health remains one of the biggest, if not the biggest, issue on the minds of voters, and will once again be a critical factor in the next Federal election, expected in the first half of 2019.

“The Federal AMA is already putting together its health policy manifesto, and expects to work constructively with the major parties on policies that will ensure a sustainable, properly funded, and affordable health system for all Australians,” Dr Bartone said.

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