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Transcript:

AMA Vice President, Dr Tony Bartone, *The Latest with Laura Jayes*, SKY News Live
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Subjects:

GP Fees, Medicare Patient Rebate Freeze

LAURA JAYES: The Australian Medical Association says a Federal Government freeze on Medicare rebates puts enormous burden on doctors to absorb the increasing costs of quality health care. To ease this pressure, the AMA has recommended doctors lift fees for a standard consultation by two dollars to \$78 from November. Health Minister Sussan Ley says doctors in Australia can decide how much they charge their patients.

[Excerpt]

SUSSAN LEY: *The Government does not employ the doctors. We're not the National Health Service from Britain; we don't set fees for doctors. We're not the Canadian Government that actually introduced price controls for doctors. We respect and we value that doctors are small businesses and they have scope to set their fees according to their wishes, their business model, and their patient cohort.*

[End of excerpt]

LAURA JAYES: From the AMA, Tony Bartone joins me. Now, Tony, thanks so much for your time. What costs are increasing for doctors and why have you recommended this increase?

TONY BARTONE: Good evening, Laura. Costs are going up all the time just like for any other small business in Australia. The costs of staff, the cost of supplies, the cost of rates, of power, of electricity, of insurances; all of these are regular input costs into the running of a quality medical practice in Australia.

And we've done today, what we've done, what we do every year around this time, and that is update and publish our medical fees list, which is a guidance to the medical community and to our members about the level or a benchmark at which fees should be looked at when they're considering their own fee structure in their own practice.

LAURA JAYES: Alright. But the most vulnerable, as I understand it, will be protected and high-service users are more likely to be bulk billed still. Is that right?

- TONY BARTONE: Look, this is essentially what is practically happening on the ground. Most doctors do have a policy which recognises that the vulnerable need to be protected and will appropriately bill or appropriately bulk bill patients in that cohort.
- LAURA JAYES: Right. The Government has said that bulk billing rates are the highest they've ever been, so where is the case for unfreezing the Medicare rebate for GPs?
- TONY BARTONE: Look, this is constantly brought into the public play. Whether the rates are high or not, the fact remains that the rates, the rebates that patients receive has been frozen at essentially almost 2012 levels.
- That's not fair to patients. In terms of bulk billing, for patients who are being bulk billed, doctors are providing that service and looking at implementing whatever other changes they can in their practice to allow them to continue.
- But in most cases, they're taking that hit below the line and there comes a point where they cannot continue to subsidise the cost of running a good quality medical practice.
- LAURA JAYES: So, where is that point? Where is that point where doctors can no longer afford to take that hit below the line? Is it fast approaching? Is this why you've recommended the fee increase today?
- TONY BARTONE: Look, the fee increase today was recommended because today is always, in the annual cycle, this is the day we publish our list.
- But I know that every day that the freeze remains, every day that freeze is in place, is another day that many doctors will make the decision that this is no longer sustainable and they need to move from bulk billing all or some of their patients to a fee for service environment.
- LAURA JAYES: Right, what have you communicated to the Federal Government in this space? I mean, I know this was a big part of the election, we've had Doctor Michael Gannon call this essentially a co-payment by stealth. Is there any movement from the Federal Government side, have you had any recent meetings with them, have you had any soundings that they're willing to look at this freeze any time in the near future?
- TONY BARTONE: Our President, Michael Gannon, and the Minister have been in regular communication and have been meeting frequently since the election, and that's at least a good sign that consultation and discussion are still taking place.

However, we still are committed, just like we were during the election campaign and prior to the election, that the freeze needs to end, the MBS indexation needs to be re-implemented immediately to ensure that access and equity and availability of medical services continue to all in the community, especially our vulnerable, especially our most disadvantaged.

LAURA JAYES: But, Tony Bartone, what I think you're saying is that, yes, you are in communication with the Government, but there is no indication that the Government's willing to move on this and, really, the Government's ignoring this plea.

TONY BARTONE: The Government and our President are in communication and discussions. There are always ways and discussions about where to go from here. And that is a very detailed and difficult process in essentially a Government that's committed to say that no new health spending can be looked at without savings. And this is where the nature of the discussions continues.

LAURA JAYES: Okay, Tony Bartone from the AMA, thanks so much for your time.

TONY BARTONE: My pleasure, Laura.

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