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## **LABOR’S MEDICARE FREEZE POLICY SIGNALS FOCUS ON GENERAL PRACTICE**

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today that Labor’s promise to bring forward the lifting of the freeze on Medicare rebates for a range of GP services is a strong signal that the major parties have recognised that supporting general practice is good health policy that will win votes.

Dr Bartone said lifting the freeze is a good start, but major investment is needed to ensure Australia’s dedicated GPs can continue to provide high-quality, easily accessible primary health care and advice.

“General practice is the most cost-effective sector of the health system. It keeps patients away from more expensive hospital care,” Dr Bartone said.

“GPs are the most trusted and respected providers of health care. They help people make better lifestyle decisions to get healthy and stay healthy.

“But the Medicare freeze and years of policy and funding neglect have placed enormous pressure on GPs and general practices.

“The costs of running a practice have risen significantly while Government support for general practice has declined.

“It is time for major investment to build the capacity of general practice to meet the primary care needs of a growing and ageing population.

“People are living longer, and they are experiencing multiple complex and chronic conditions as they age. They need their GPs to help them maintain a high quality of life.

“We also need to make general practice a more attractive career option for our medical students and graduates. More GPs will be needed to meet the growing demand for high quality primary health care.”

Dr Bartone said the AMA has been lobbying the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader, Ministers and Shadow Ministers, MPs, and Senators about the critical importance of general practice to the sustainability of the health system.

“The AMA has gone to the major parties with a detailed plan to secure a strong future for general practice in Australia,” Dr Bartone said.

“All of our political leaders are listening, and they acknowledge the vital role of GPs and general practice in keeping people well and out of hospital.

“They understand that strong general practice will complement our public hospitals and the private health sector and take the pressure off them.

“Doctors and patients now need to see this commitment to general practice reflected in the health policies that the major parties will take to the election,” Dr Bartone said.

The AMA plan for greater long-term investment in general practice includes:

- a program for patients with chronic disease who are most at risk of unplanned hospitalisation (including readmission), providing a quarterly ‘care coordination’ payment to GPs to support a more pro-active and team-based approach to care. This would supplement existing Medicare funding arrangements;
- additional funding for the Practice Incentive Program (PIP) to properly support the introduction of the PIP Quality Improvement Incentive (PIPQII) and avoid the loss of other key PIP incentives;
- retention of the Aged Care Access Incentive (ACAI);
- introduction of specific MBS rebates for GP telehealth consultations provided by a patient’s usual GP for after-hours services, patients with a GP Management Plan, patients with mobility problems, and patients in residential aged care facilities;
- increased support for longer GP consultations through the introduction of an ‘extended’ Level B MBS consultation item that recognises the extra work involved for those GPs who spend more time with their patients;
- improved access to after-hours GP services for patients by bringing forward the Medicare definition of after-hours in-rooms consultation items so that they commence at 6.00pm on weeknights and 12 noon on a Saturday;
- support for patients with hard-to-heal wounds by funding the costs of dressings for patients who have a diabetic foot ulcer or diabetic leg ulcer, have a venous or arterial leg ulcer, or are 65 years of age and over; and
- support for enhanced access to GP-led team-based care for patients by lifting the caps on subsidies available through the incoming Workforce Incentive Program, which will make it easier to employ nurses, pharmacists, and allied health professionals in general practice.

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