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**BUPA AND TERRY WHITE PHARMACY PARTNERSHIP DEVALUING
QUALITY PRIMARY HEALTH CARE**

AMA President, Tony Bartone, today hit out at a “Health Benefit Package” being promoted by TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacies – in partnership with Bupa, one of Australia’s largest health insurers – as an attack on general practice and a devaluing of quality primary health care in Australia.

The so-called health package is asking pharmacy customers to pay an annual subscription to receive health checks (BMI, blood pressure, blood glucose, and total cholesterol), flu vaccinations, pharmacist health consultations, and REWARDS points.

Dr Bartone said that this crass commercialisation of primary health care is a sneaky move to introduce US-style managed care to the Australian health system by stealth.

“The AMA and other responsible medical groups used the recent election campaign to increase government and community focus on the importance of investing in high quality general practice,” Dr Bartone said.

“Properly funded and resourced primary health care, led by general practitioners who are skilled and experienced in holistic health care, is the future of health care in this country.

“The best and safest place for people to access quality primary health care and advice is the local community general practice from highly trained and experienced GPs.

“General practice provides confidentiality, privacy, and the value of the doctor-patient relationship throughout all stages of life.

“It is not appropriate to conduct sensitive, sometimes life-saving, health checks in busy retail environments, many of which promote dangerous, unproven alternative medicines and therapies.

“General practice is the foundation of quality primary health care in Australia, and any threats to undermine it or replace it with inferior models of care must be rejected.

“It is outrageous that a large health insurer like Bupa would endeavour to undermine general practice, especially after a thorough Government review of private health insurance to ensure that policyholders received high quality and value for money for their significant investment in insurance.

“This partnership will fragment quality primary health care and put further question marks over the value of private health insurance – just as radical new reforms are being implemented.”

Dr Bartone said that the AMA will be asking the Health Minister to investigate the role of Bupa in this partnership.

“There has been no attempt at meaningful consultation by Bupa – a major player in the private health insurance and aged care sectors - with the AMA and the medical profession about this potentially dangerous initiative,” Dr Bartone said.

“Bupa is sailing into uncharted waters with this arrangement. It should be focused on its activities in private health, aged care, and its recent foray into Defence health services, rather than pursue a partnership that seeks to sabotage general practice and put patient care at risk.”

Dr Bartone said that pharmacists and GPs work well at the local community level in long-established partnerships that are built on mutual trust and respect for each other’s specialised scopes of practice.

“The health system and patients benefit most when all health professionals are fully engaged in their professional roles,” Dr Bartone said.

“Pharmacies marketing unnecessary and expensive pathology tests and other ‘health screening’ services to their customers – and charging an annual subscription - is a push to increase profits at the expense of evidence-based, cost-effective health care.

“These activities are not within the scope of practice of a pharmacist.

“Pharmacies in the community play an important role in providing medicines information to the public, and ensuring that all Australians have access to medicines in a timely and safe manner.

“But doctors are the only health professionals trained to fully assess a person, initiate further investigations, make a diagnosis, and understand and recommend the full range of clinically appropriate treatments for a given condition.

“Health checks, screening activities, and diagnostic tests should only be conducted if they are clinically indicated, backed by evidence, and cost effective. Unnecessary ‘health checks’ are costly for patients and can cause needless concern.

“There is no doubt that hiving off certain aspects of health care, such as screening and pathology ordering, only duplicates effort and fragments care.

“The Bupa-TerryWhite partnership is a misguided marketing exercise that is an insult to GPs, a threat to the health of patients, a blight on the health system, and the Government should outlaw it immediately,” Dr Bartone said.

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