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Transcript: AMA President Professor Brian Owler, Today, Channel 9, 29 December 2015

Subject: MBS Review

TIM MCMILLAN: Twenty-three items on the Medicare Benefits Schedule are facing the axe as Government works on a major shake-up to the health system. The recommended cuts have left doctors divided. Here to discuss is the President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Brian Owler. Dr Owler, thanks for your time this morning.

Five and a half thousand-odd items on the MBS, these 23 facing the axe - why have they been singled out? What are they?

BRIAN OWLER: Well these items are really the first in a series that are going to be suggested to the Minister and the Government for consideration to be removed. This is part of this MBS review. There are probably about 80 working groups that will form over the two year period; this is just the first six working groups. And it's considered things like ENT surgery, some respiratory medicine, diagnostic imaging, gynaecology.

TIM MCMILLAN: How many people are we talking about being affected by these cuts, and are they likely to face higher costs?

BRIAN OWLER: Well that's always the concern, because the medical benefits schedule is actually about what rebate the patient will get back from Medicare and the Government when they undergo a test or when they undergo some sort of procedure. Now the items that have been flagged so far, many of them there are alternative items on the schedule that may be able to be used. But there are some items of course they'll want to remove, but it may be part of a procedure, and when those are taken away that may actually impact in terms of out of pocket expenses, because the patient's rebate is likely to be less.

TIM MCMILLAN: The Health Minister herself has said that these 23 items have been singled out after extensive consultation with doctors, that it was the doctors themselves who recommended these 23 items be cut. Are you aware of those consultations, and do you agree with what doctors have supposedly told her?

BRIAN OWLER: Well the AMA has supported the MBS review right from the start of the year. We've had our concerns along the way, particularly around the impacts for patient access, and we don't want this to be purely a cost-cutting exercise. At the end of the day, it has to be a modern schedule that benefits patients. Now what the AMA has been doing is making sure that the working groups are engaged with the specialist societies and colleges, the experts in the area, and the next stage is to go back to consultation more widely from those working groups, and then further recommendations about those. Those particular items will then go to the Minister.

TIM MCMILLAN: Well hopefully, as you say, it's all an efficiency measure and not a cost-cutting thing that might add up to more costs for the patients. So we'll have to wait and see. Dr Owler, thanks for your time this morning.

BRIAN OWLER: Pleasure.

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