



January: AMA President Dr Steve Hambleton talking to ABC Radio's Hack program about steroid use



February: Dr Hambleton launched the 2014 Public Hospital Report Card

Year in Review

January

The year began with medical students calling for better mental health support for tertiary students, following the release of an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report, that showed young Australians were at greater risk of developing a mental health disorder. The AMA and Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) reiterated concerns over the dismantling in late 2013 of the Independent Health Advisory Group (IHAG), which examined the provision of health services to asylum seekers. AMA President Dr Steve Hambleton said patient safety could be compromised in a trial of flu vaccinations being administered in Queensland pharmacies. The AMA called on the Federal Government to convene a National Summit on Alcohol to develop effective national solutions to the epidemic of alcohol misuse and harms afflicting local communities across the nation. The AMA and AMSA were alarmed by reports that Curtin University (WA) was proceeding with plans for a new medical school. In a speech to the Medicare Anniversary Roundtable, Dr Hambleton said that any changes in health policy must be in the context of the long term goal to improve population health, which will deliver real cost savings.

February

As the dispute over hospital doctor contracts continued in Queensland, the AMA urged doctors to reject the contracts on offer from the Government,

and asked the Government to return to the negotiating table in good faith. Doctors soon after voted to reject the contracts, which placed further pressure on the Government to negotiate better contracts. Meanwhile, independent legal advice gained by the AMA showed that the contracts were 'draconian' and 'inferior'. The AMA welcomed the PM's *Closing the Gap Report* and the *Close the Gap Campaign Progress and Priorities Report*, which both highlighted key areas of success in closing the gap. Dr Hambleton launched the *2014 AMA Public Hospital Report Card*, once again highlighting the need for more funding to help struggling hospitals meet growing patient demand. The Report Card exposed significant Federal Government cuts to public hospital funding. United General Practice Australia told the Government that affordable and timely health care in rural and urban settings would be at risk without significant new investment in general practice. The AMA and Rural Doctors Association of Australia joined forces to urge the Government to change the flawed remoteness classification system, saying that it disadvantages smaller communities. The NSW Government publicly supported the AMA's plans for a Federal Government-backed National Alcohol Summit, but the Federal Government declined to offer support. A report from the Australian National Preventive Health Agency (ANPHA) showed that young Australians were being exposed to unprecedented levels of alcohol advertising, providing further evidence of the need for a national summit. AMA Vice President Professor Geoff Dobb said that the Government



March: Dr Hambleton met with Prime Minister Tony Abbott



April: Dr Hambleton spoke out against the Queensland Doctor Contracts

should reinstate the star rating food health website, which was controversially taken down following food industry lobbying. The AMA urged the food industry to get behind the star rating system. Dr Hambleton praised the ACT Government for banning the sale of fruit juice and soft drink in Canberra public schools. During a SKY News interview, Dr Hambleton warned Government against considering GP co-payments as part of Budget measures.

March

The AMA released its *Position Statement on Women's Health*, with Dr Hambleton joined by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, Senator Michaelia Cash, and Senator for the Northern Territory, Nova Peris, for the launch at Parliament House in Canberra. Dr Hambleton used Brisbane radio interviews to put further pressure on the Queensland Government to resolve the long-running hospital doctor contract dispute. It worked. Within days, Queensland Health Minister Lawrence Springborg announced a 'new dialogue' with the medical profession to end the crisis. The AMA released its *Position Statement on Wind Farms and Health*, highlighting that the available evidence does not support the view that wind farms cause adverse health effects. The AMA Council of Doctors in Training expressed fears that the Queensland doctor crisis would jeopardise training opportunities for the next generation of doctors. In a speech to the International Primary Health Care Reform Conference, Dr Hambleton stressed the AMA view that GPs are the foundation of quality primary health care in Australia, and must be supported, not penalised. The AMA's new *Position Statement on Private Health Insurance*

and *Primary Care Services* encouraged the medical profession to look at models that would support a greater role for GPs in caring for privately insured patients. On Close the Gap Day, Dr Hambleton said that every day must be Close the Gap Day to build momentum to achieve genuine long-term improvements in Indigenous health. Dr Hambleton addressed another mass rally of Queensland doctors as the contract crisis continued. The AMA vowed to continue negotiating better conditions for rural doctors as the ACCC renewed the AMA's authorisation to collectively bargain. As a national alcohol poll highlighted dangerous rates of alcohol dependency in the Australian community, the AMA renewed its calls on the Federal Government to host a National Alcohol Summit. As March drew to a close, Qld Health Minister Springborg's so-called 'new dialogue' fell apart, with legal threats made against the AMA and other groups.

April

AMSA implored the Government to join with the health sector to take stronger action on climate change, with a special emphasis on the health impacts of climate change. Dr Hambleton dismissed reports of disunity in doctor ranks in the pursuit of fairer contracts in Queensland, putting the rumours down to Government mischief. The AMA released its revised *Position Statement on Ethical Considerations for Medical Practitioners in Disaster Response* in Australia, which outlined a doctor's duty of care in disasters, including natural and man-made disasters, pandemics, and terrorist activities. The *Economic Value of Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services* report was hailed by Dr Hambleton as a



May: Newly elected AMA President Associate Professor Brian Owler met with Health Minister Peter Dutton



June: A/Professor Owler and AMA Vice President Dr Stephen Parnis met with Opposition Leader Bill Shorten

long overdue analysis of the economic benefits of the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector. Amid reports of Government plans to charge patients who present to public hospital emergency departments, the AMA called for serious consultation on health policy ahead of the May Budget. Dr Hambleton said the policy ideas being floated were trying to solve a problem that did not exist. The AMA welcomed the Government's announcement that it would discontinue the previous Government's failed GP Super Clinics program. The AMA advised that proposed mass doctor resignations from the Queensland health system had been voted against as the Queensland Government indicated it was moving to restore fairness to hospital doctor contracts in line with conditions set by the AMA. This effectively resolved the crisis.

May

Dr Hambleton said that the decline in public hospital capacity in the latest *Australian Hospital Statistics* report was further evidence that public hospitals should be spared from cuts in the May Budget. The AMA slammed the Commission of Audit health recommendations, including a GP co-payment, axing of key agencies, and task substitution. The AMA urged the Government to commit long-term funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services for at least five years. The AMA shared the view of the Horvath Review of Medicare Locals that the organisations needed a major overhaul. Professor Dobb said that Medicare Locals were inconsistent, overly bureaucratic, duplicated services, and did not truly represent the best interests or key role of GPs as leaders in primary health care. The AMA described the 2014 Health Budget as being full of pain for patients,

with a co-payment for GP services and a rebate freeze among other unpopular measures. Indigenous health agencies lost funding in the Budget. The AMA AGM adopted a new Constitution, which changed the governance of the Association. The AMA National Conference was held in Canberra, with the US Ambassador, The Hon John Berry, delivering the keynote address. Delegates to the Conference passed a resolution calling on the Government to revisit its co-payment policy. The Conference also declared support for Turkish doctors imprisoned for providing care to injured protestors. The AMA Gold Medal was presented to former AMA President Dr Mukesh Haikerwal in recognition of his outstanding service to the medical profession and the community. Sydney neurosurgeon, Associate Professor Brian Owler, was elected AMA President, taking over from Dr Steve Hambleton. Dr Stephen Parnis, a Melbourne emergency physician, was elected Vice President. A/Prof Owler said that public hospital emergency departments faced tough times ahead without sufficient guaranteed long-term funding.

June

New AMA President A/Prof Brian Owler made a flying start in the job with an extensive round of national media interviews on the Government's controversial GP co-payment policy. A/Prof Owler and Dr Parnis presented at a Roundtable discussion on the mental health of doctors and medical students. The AMA slammed the spread of misinformation from the tobacco industry, which was desperate to undermine the effects of strong measures such as tobacco plain packaging. A/Prof Owler wrote to the Prime Minister asking the Government to urge Turkish authorities to drop legal action against imprisoned doctors.



July: A/Professor Owler addressed the National Press Club



August: A/Professor Owler presented the AMA GP co-payment model

The AMA sought similar Government assistance in the case of jailed Sudanese doctor, Dr Meriam Yeyha Ibrahim. In its response to the COAG Reform Council's Healthcare Performance Report, the AMA warned that the Government's Budget changes could erode hard-won improvements in the health system. A/Prof Owler criticised the Government over MBS indexation. The AMA launched its *Position Statement on Physical Activity* and its *Position Statement on Advertising and Public Endorsement*. The internationally-respected Commonwealth Fund released a report that warned against co-payments for general practice, pathology, and imaging. A/Prof Owler condemned *The Australian* newspaper for promoting the views of Big Tobacco and attacking plain packaging legislation. A report from the COAG Reform Council showed that no State or Territory met all their targets for elective surgery or emergency department performance in 2013. Dr Parnis launched the second annual report of the Alcohol Advertising Review Board, which showed self-regulation of alcohol advertising was ineffective. A/Prof Owler met with Prime Minister Abbott to discuss the GP co-payment and other Budget measures. The PM asked the AMA to come back to him with an alternative co-payment model for consideration.

July

July started with A/Prof Owler calling on Woolworths to scrap plans to introduce in-store health checks in its supermarkets, labelling the plan as dangerous. The Department of Human Services (DHS) came under attack for issuing advice that practice nurse time would not count in MBS Health Assessment items. DHS came under further fire when revised

advice added to the confusion. A/Prof Owler suggested that DHS should use plain English to get the right messages out. The AMA's annual tribute to hardworking GPs, Family Doctor Week, promoted the theme, *Your Family Doctor – Keeping You Healthy*. Sydney University's *Byte from the Beach* report provided further evidence that the Government's proposed co-payments would hit vulnerable patients the hardest. A/Prof Owler delivered a nationally televised address from the National Press Club on ensuring the sustainability of the health system. The AMA released its *Position Statement on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. The National Drugs Strategy Households Survey showed a welcome and significant decrease in smoking rates in Australia. The AMA joined the world in mourning the tragic loss of lives aboard Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. A/Prof Owler addressed the Senate Inquiry in relation to out-of-pocket expenses.

August

The month commenced with a constructive meeting between A/Prof Owler and Health Minister Dutton, with the Minister committing his office and Department to properly consider the AMA's alternative fairer co-payment plan. A/Prof Owler travelled to South Australia and Western Australia for meetings with State Government leaders and local AMAs. A/Prof Owler was highly critical of comments from Senator Eric Abetz linking abortion and breast cancer. A/Prof Owler visited the Northern Territory on an Indigenous health fact finding tour. The AMA released its alternative co-payment plan at a packed press conference at AMA House. The plan received extensive media coverage, but relations with Health Minister Dutton soured when he described the AMA



September: A/Professor Owler met with Finance Minister Mathias Cormann



October: A/Professor Owler spoke about the harms of alcohol at the AMA National Alcohol Summit

plan as a 'cash grab'. The annual AMA Parliamentary Dinner was well attended, with A/Prof Owler telling the gathered politicians and health sector leaders that doctors take their role of advocating for patients very seriously. The AMA congratulated the Department of Health for finally providing clear advice on practice nurses and health assessments, after the DHS had repeatedly got it wrong. A/Prof Owler raised concerns about the Government's higher education reforms and their impact on the cost of medical degrees and the future medical workforce.

September

A/Prof Owler called on the Government to rule out a reported deal with the Pharmacy Guild to fund pharmacies to provide medical health checks. At the same time, the Guild embarked on a multi-million dollar advertising blitz promoting an expanded primary care role for pharmacists. The AMA released its *Position Statement on Regional Training Networks*, which sought greater collaboration between governments to maximise medical workforce resources and expertise. The AMA released its *Position Statement on the 'Easy Entry, Gracious Exit' Model for Provision of Medical Services in Small Rural and Remote Towns*, which supports an innovative plan to attract and retain medical professionals in small country towns. The AMA submission to the Government's After Hours Primary Health Care Review included a call for restoration of Practice Incentive Program (PIP) payments to general practices to support the provision of quality after hours primary care services in local communities. The AMA released its *Position Statement on End of Life Care and Advance Care Planning*, with Dr Parnis saying there should be open and frank discussion in

the community about death and dying, including end-of-life care options, futile treatment, caring and bereavement, and advance care planning. A/Prof Owler took to the media to raise serious concerns about the national and international response to the escalating Ebola crisis in West Africa. A/Prof Owler said that Australia should be sending health workers as well as aid. The Government responded within a week with increased financial assistance. Analysis from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which showed that national health spending had grown by a record low figure, prompted the AMA to again demand that the Government drop its controversial Medicare Budget measures. A/Prof Owler encouraged the Government to actively assist medical workers who wanted to travel to West Africa to care for people infected with Ebola. The AMA welcomed the announcement of clinical trials of medicinal cannabis in NSW. A/Prof Owler addressed the AMSA Global Health Conference on global health issues.

October

Dr Parnis was named an Ambassador for the alcohol harm awareness campaign, October. The AMA sent a clear message to Senate crossbenchers that it remained strongly opposed to the Government's GP co-payment model, with Dr Parnis saying the policy would hurt the most disadvantaged in the community. The AMA expressed concerns that as many as 240 medical graduates could miss out on an intern position in 2015 after the National Medical Intern Data Management Working Group reported that the States were not providing sufficient internships. Dr Parnis talked to radio legend, John Laws, about Ebola, following the first confirmed case in the United States, and followed up next day with



November: A/Professor Owler attended the World Medical Association H20 International Health Summit in Melbourne

Fran Kelly on Radio National to discuss Australia's Ebola response. A/Prof Owler urged calm as an Australian Red Cross nurse was tested for Ebola upon her return from West Africa. The AMA raised concerns about the possible impact of the GP co-payment on emergency departments, with estimates of an extra 500,000 patients forced to seek care in emergency. A/Prof Owler held several media conferences around the country imploring greater Government action on Ebola. The AMA staged a successful national Alcohol Summit in Canberra, with a Summit Communique outlining a proposal for a new National Alcohol Strategy. A/Prof Owler said that the Government had handed Australia's medical research sector a 'poisoned chalice' by linking funding for the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) to the GP co-payment. Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash was congratulated by the AMA for welcome rural medical workforce reforms.

November

Nominations were called for the AMA Indigenous People's Medical Scholarship, which has assisted more than 20 Indigenous men and women become doctors since 1994. A/Prof Owler welcomed the announcement that the Government would provide greater support to international efforts to contain the Ebola outbreak in West Africa. A survey by the Australasian College of Emergency Medicine uncovered a high incidence of alcohol-related violence from drunk patients in emergency departments, which the AMA cited as further proof that a whole-of-government strategy was needed to address alcohol-related harms in the community. An independent report commissioned by the AMA revealed that the Government's proposed co-payments would be a costly red tape nightmare for

medical practices. New Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) reports from the University of Sydney supported the AMA view that general practice delivers the best value for money in the Australian health system, and that greater investment in general practice was needed. A/Prof Owler addressed the Private Healthcare Australia Directors' Day, sending a strong message that the Australian health care system was effective and affordable, and it was time for a discussion about how GPs could play a more prominent and central role in private health insurance arrangements. A/Prof Owler told the *Australian Financial Review* Higher Education Forum that the Government's plans to deregulate university fees would see a medical degree cost as much as \$250,000, possibly more in some cases. The Federal AMA and AMA Victoria supported the WMA H20 International Health Summit in Melbourne, with A/Prof Owler using his Summit speech to outline how governments should make wiser investments in health. The AMA joined forces with the WMA and other medical associations from around the world to call on the United Nations to set a goal to deliver safe water and sanitation to 'everyone, everywhere' by 2030. The AMA released *Clinical Images and the Use of Personal Mobile Devices*, a guide for medical students and doctors on the proper use of personal mobile devices such as smart phones, laptops, and portable music devices. On White Ribbon Day, the AMA pledged support for measures that stop men's violence against women. The Government announced that it would not introduce its co-payments or Medicare patient rebate cuts by regulation if it failed to get its legislation through the Senate. A/Prof Owler welcomed the Government's decision to contract Aspen Medical to coordinate Australian support to tackle the Ebola outbreak at its source in West Africa.



December: A/Professor Owler met with newly inducted Health Minister Sussan Ley

December

A/Prof Owler held a media conference at Parliament House in Canberra calling on the Government to clear the air on its co-payment plans, amid rumours of a deal between the Government and the Palmer United Party over a revised Medicare policy. The AMA applauded the Government's legislation to crack down on cyber bullying of children. The AMA released its plan to cut red tape in medical practice in a submission to the Parliamentary Secretary coordinating red tape streamlining. Dr Parnis told reporters at a doorstep interview that the AMA had concerns with the Government's revised co-payment model. A/Prof Owler described the new model as a 'mixed bag', highlighting the \$5 Medicare rebate cut and rebate freeze as major concerns and other elements under a question mark. Dr Parnis expressed concerns about health workforce planning, with little evidence of activity since the abolition of Health Workforce Australia. The AMA released its *Position Statement on Call Centre Triage and Advice Services*,

which reflected changes to services over the last decade and incorporated updated data and research. Dr Parnis welcomed the reinstatement of the Health Star Rating website. Following careful examination of the Government's revised co-payment model, and consultation with members, A/Prof Owler announced that the AMA strongly opposed the rebate cut, the rebate freeze, and new arrangements for short GP consults, and made it clear that the AMA would actively campaign against the policies. A/Prof Owler issued a road safety warning ahead of Christmas, urging people to take special care on the roads. The AMA welcomed the appointment of new Health Minister, Sussan Ley. A/Prof Owler urged families to talk about organ donation over the holidays to ensure that family members' wishes were carried out. The AMA called for care around water over the holidays, warning of the dangers of injury and drowning. A/Prof Owler ended the year recommending that Australians make a New Year's resolution to have difficult family conversations about end of life care, seek advice and to make appropriate plans.