

Health

Our Medicare system is under stress. The cost of visiting a GP has skyrocketed, and our public hospitals are under resourced and overwhelmed. Aged care is in crisis and low income people cannot afford a dentist.

Medicare is at the crossroads.

The Government's \$15.7 million advertising blitz is telling us that they are strengthening Medicare. But Australian families and health professionals tell a different story. They say far from being strengthened, Medicare is being destroyed. Bulk-billing has dropped to dangerously low levels, and working people will have to pay more for visits to the doctor.

In the next Federal Election, the choices are stark. We can continue on the path toward a two-tier, American-style health system, where the size of your wallet determines the level of care you receive. Or we can choose a path that restores Medicare and universal access to a bulk-billing doctor, and ensure everyone receives quality healthcare on the basis of need, not ability to pay.

What health professionals say about the state of bulk billing and our hospitals



**CON COSTA, GP
DOCTORS REFORM GROUP**

'The Government's new measures are politically clever but it still clearly wants to get rid of Medicare. They are just a stop gap measure to win an election.

The Government is creating a two-tier system. It wants working people to pay for healthcare. And even for pensioners and young people – who are subsidised – it will be difficult to get quality time with a doctor.'

The Government is creating a two-tier

**CHRIS, PUBLIC HOSPITAL NURSE
MEMBER, AUSTRALIAN NURSING
FEDERATION**



'Finding a doctor who bulk bills is almost impossible, which means that many sick people have no choice but to turn up at our emergency department. I've seen very sick people, who can't afford to pay for a doctor, wait for many hours to be seen. It's terrible for the patient and it increases the workloads of nurses and other health professionals who work in emergency.'

**DIANA ASMAR,
PATHOLOGY COLLECTOR
MEMBER, HEALTH SERVICES
UNION**



'When I was at the Royal Melbourne Hospital there was increased pressure on patients who could not even have their blood tested at the local GP because of the cost. Over the last 2 years in particular I saw a drastic increase in patients attending our clinics. Patients often came in agitated and nervous and in some cases deteriorating physically because of the extra wait that they were forced to make.'

Five things the Medicare ads don't tell us.

- Bulk-billing rates fell to a 14 year low in 2003 and out of pocket costs to see a GP have increased by 75% — leading to a three million drop in GP visits last year. Many people can no longer afford to see a doctor.
- People without children who are working for minimum wages have to pay an extra \$14 a week on medical costs before they are eligible for the Government's new Medicare 'Safety Net'.
- The Howard Government axed the Commonwealth Dental Scheme and there are now half a million low income Australians waiting up to five years to get their teeth fixed
- Nurses and other health workers are leaving their jobs because they are overworked and upset they cannot provide the care that patients need. This has caused a shortage of skilled staff.
- The number of frail older people waiting more than three months for a residential aged care place has increased by 9% over the five years to 2003.



Medicare's future?

- The Coalition's Health Minister, Mr Tony Abbott boasts that "The Medicare Plus safety net moves the whole system in the direction of Coalition values... Health is a market. If the doctor charges you, you ought to expect to pay something." (*The Age*, 22 April 2004)
- Medicare founder, Professor John Deeble has said that the Government's new "Safety Net" is leading to rising

fees and "threatened the basic concept of Medicare". (*Courier Mail*, 16 July 2004)

- Labor leader Mark Latham however has pledged \$1.9 billion extra funding to rebuild Medicare by lifting bulk-billing rates across the country, providing free dental care to people on low incomes and reforming the healthcare system. (*The Age*, 20 June 2004)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Find out more

about what health workers and unions are saying about Medicare, bulk-billing and the health policies of political parties by visiting the ACTU website at www.actu.asn.au

Talk to your family,

friends and workmates.

Make sure they are enrolled to vote, and encourage them to use their vote to improve Medicare and increase bulk-billing.

Ask the candidates

in your electorate about their commitment to saving Medicare and bulk-billing.

For more information

contact the ACTU Election Hotline on 1300 362 223.

Make sure you are enrolled to vote in this year's Federal Election, by calling 13 23 36 or by visiting the website: www.aec.gov.au