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ADIA calls on Labor to fix the hidden gap in its Medicare platform

MELBOURNE: The Australian Diagnostic Imaging Association (ADIA) has welcomed Labor's commitment to maintain bulk billing incentives for general patients, but is calling upon Labor to fix the hidden gap in its Medicare platform by ending the 18-year rebate freeze in diagnostic imaging to protect patient access to safe and affordable x-rays and scans.

"A Shorten Labor Government will restore indexation of the Medicare Benefits Schedule from 1 January 2017. This will apply to all services provided by GPs ... and medical specialists." – Bill Shorten, 19 May 2016

Labor is campaigning on a platform of protecting Medicare by unfreezing and indexing the Medicare Benefits Schedule from 2017, but diagnostic imaging is not included in its pledge.

Eighteen years without indexation of patient rebates is undermining affordable access to x-rays and scans - rebates have fallen in real terms by up to 57% since 1998. Every diagnostic imaging examination is supervised and the results analysed by specialist doctors, so the freeze has caused rebates to lag behind the cost of performing the service.

Chronic underfunding in diagnostic imaging has led to an average patient gap payment of almost \$100 charged on more than 5.5 million services in 2014-15. These gaps have doubled in the last decade, and will continue to grow without indexation under Labor's policy.

ADIA is concerned that without indexation many of the 15,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer each year will be denied the benefits of early diagnosis and treatment. Breast cancer detection and treatment relies on multiple diagnostic imaging services – services that carry a low rebate that has been frozen since 1998. Rebates for diagnostic mammograms and breast biopsies are so low that even with the bulk billing incentive, many practices either do not offer the service or are forced to charge gaps – sometimes in the hundreds of dollars.

ADIA President Dr Christian Wriedt says the sector is open to working with Labor to secure a path to affordable access to services through indexation of diagnostic imaging:

"The Coalition has recognised the serious issues affecting patients today, and has committed to index diagnostic imaging when it lifts the rebate freeze for GPs, and implement the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists' recommendations for a Quality Framework to protect patients' safety and ensure they can access quality services. Labor has not committed to address either issue."

"Labor's commitment to maintain the bulk billing incentive for general patients is a welcome move, but unless rebates are indexed it is not enough to ensure that all Australians can access affordable x-rays and scans when and where they need them. There is a hidden gap in Labor's Medicare plans, and patients will be shocked when they have to pay increasing out-of-pocket costs because Labor has not committed to funding that will protect bulk billing. We're keen for them to work with the sector to find a pathway to address this by ending the freeze" said Dr Wriedt.

Press release



“We’re already seeing gap payments growing and services being withdrawn because they are not viable under the current funding arrangement. There is a risk that without indexation bulk billing will become a thing of the past, even for many concession patients. Diagnostic Imaging is a cornerstone of primary care – we need to ensure barriers to diagnosis are overcome”.

Media enquiries: Annette Stenhouse 0416 861 732