

Missed diagnoses and further burden for sickest Australians predicted without Medicare indexation

Radiologists have warned of the increased risk of missed diagnoses and an additional \$133 million to be borne by Australians fighting chronic illness unless the Federal Government reverses a 12 year freeze on Medicare fees for x-rays and other crucial imaging tests.

A survey by the Australian Diagnostic Imaging Association (ADIA) has revealed 88% of private radiology practices are concerned that patients will be at increased risk of a missed diagnosis if Medicare fees for radiology are not indexed to the cost of living in the Federal Budget.

“The wider the gap, the more patients need to pay and the greater the chance of patients forgoing scans due to cost, or practices not being able to offer the technology or standards of care that deliver the best diagnosis,” said Dr Ron Shnier, President of ADIA.

The survey also found that without increased Medicare funding, 94% of practices will be forced to increase charges in order to cover the widening gap between their costs and current patient rebates.

The survey of 604 practices predicts a 12.5% increase in patient gap payments and a 30% increase in non bulk billed imaging examinations. This would equate to patients having to pay \$436 million in the next 12 months – a 40% increase on what patients paid in 2010.

“The bottom line is more sick Australians paying more for potentially life-saving radiology services,” said Dr Shnier.

ADIA is calling on the Federal Government to index patient rebates for imaging services in next month’s Federal Budget or accept an inevitable decline in the care delivered to sick Australians.

“Early and accurate diagnosis saves lives and yet the cost of providing these services is now 20 to 30 per cent higher than patient rebates paid by Medicare,” said Dr Shnier.

“Unlike many medical procedures, patient rebates for imaging services are not indexed to the cost of living. This is punishing patients and compromising the level of care that patients can afford,” he said.

The concerns of ADIA are shared by nine of Australia’s leading patient advocacy groups and healthcare providers including the Cancer Council, The Warwick Foundation and Cancer Voices Australia.

“If patient rebates are not indexed to keep pace with inflation and increasing costs, we believe the health outcomes of our patients may be compromised and lives may be put at risk,” said the nine groups in a joint communiqué to members of the Federal Parliament. The communiqué called on the Government to *“take immediate action and introduce indexation of diagnostic imaging rebates to ensure that patients can access quality and affordable imaging services”*.

ADIA’s call for urgent Budget action has been actively supported by 30,000 sick and financially stressed Australians who have signed and penned letters to the Federal Health Minister, Nicola Roxon.

“My sister died of breast cancer at 57 because she could not afford a mammogram that could have saved her life,” said one letter. *“Please reduce the cost of x-rays because I need the result for further treatment,”* pleaded another.

For further information on ADIA, Australia’s peak radiology provider group, visit www.adia.asn.au

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