

Increase in Medicare-covered MRI a positive step, but broader funding frozen in time

Today's announcement that the Federal Government will remove barriers to Medicare-funded MRI services for children and people living in regional areas has been applauded by the peak body representing private radiology practices.

The Australian Diagnostic Imaging Association (ADIA) described increased Medicare funding for MRI services as "an important step towards overcoming more than a decade of under-funding for essential medical imaging services".

According to Dr Sue Ulreich, President of ADIA, increased access to Medicare funded MRI services from November will be of particular benefit to children aged under 16 years who need an MRI scan and those in regional communities where there was an MRI service available but no Medicare funding for patients.

"The Government has recognised that Medicare funding has not kept pace with advances in medical imaging and that access to MRI services in Australia is at one of the lowest levels in the developed world," said Dr Ulreich.

"However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Too many imaging procedures, including MRI, remain seriously under-funded and others are not covered by Medicare, leaving them out of reach for many Australians," she said.

Dr Ulreich explained that despite the increasing importance of medical imaging, and rising medical and staff costs, Medicare rebates for essential medical imaging services have not been indexed by the Government since 1998, in contrast to almost all other specialist services covered by Medicare which are indexed annually.

"Staffing with specialist radiologists and highly trained radiographers and sonographers constitutes 60 per cent of the cost of providing medical imaging services and these staff costs continue to increase year-on-year. Therefore, while patients may have their procedures bulk billed, there has been a steady decline in staffing ratios and specialist supervision of medical imaging procedures in order to keep services affordable in the face of systemic underfunding," said Dr Ulreich.

"Government funding for medical imaging must be indexed in order to keep pace with the medical needs of Australians," she concluded.

ADIA represents private medical imaging practices which diagnose and treat 50,000 patients every day and operate 80 per cent of the comprehensive practices that provide services to patients in rural and regional Australia. ADIA members are both for-profit and charitable and operate practices in the community and in public and private hospitals throughout Australia.

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