

Agreement Concerning the Provision of Health Care between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia

Background

- 5.1 The *Agreement Concerning the Provision of Health Care between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia* (the Agreement) is the latest in a series of bilateral reciprocal health care agreements.¹ The agreements provide access to the public health care systems of the signatories for any necessary treatment required by residents of one country temporarily visiting the other.²
- 5.2 Australia's bilateral reciprocal health care agreements are negotiated with countries that provide public health care of a similar standard to that available in Australia.³
- 5.3 Australia has already concluded agreements with:
- New Zealand in 1986;
 - the United Kingdom in 1986;
 - Malta in 1988;
 - Sweden in 1989;

1 National Interest Analysis (NIA), para 3.

2 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

3 Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, *Report 87*, 16 August 2007, p. 14.

- the Netherlands in 1992;
- Finland in 1993;
- the Republic of Ireland in 1998;
- Norway in 2004; and
- Belgium in 2009.⁴

5.4 An agreement with Demark is expected to be concluded in 2011.⁵

Reciprocal health care agreements

5.5 When a person from one of the countries that is party to a reciprocal health care agreement is temporarily staying in the other country and is in need of immediate medical attention, the agreements require that the person be provided with the medical services which are clinically necessary for the diagnosis, treatment and care of the person.⁶ The medical services available to the person include general practitioners, pharmaceuticals and public hospital care.⁷

5.6 The standard of treatment provided to the person is to be the same as the standard of treatment provided to the residents of the country the person is visiting.⁸

5.7 Neither party to a reciprocal health care agreement is liable for the cost of their residents' treatment in the other country.⁹ According to the Department of Health and Ageing (DHA), the similar number of travellers between each of the signatories makes reciprocal health care agreements cost neutral.¹⁰

5.8 Reciprocal health care agreements are particularly useful for travellers who are fit to travel but are unable to obtain travel insurance because of pre-existing medical conditions or because of their age.¹¹

4 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

5 NIA, para 4.

6 NIA, para 8.

7 Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, *Report 87*, 16 August 2007, p. 13.

8 NIA, para 8.

9 NIA, para 9.

10 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

11 Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, *Report 87*, 16 August 2007, p. 14.

- 5.9 The DHA also emphasises the wider public health benefits of ensuring that visitors receive appropriate treatment and are therefore not a risk to those they come into contact with.¹²
- 5.10 The only people not covered by the Agreement are those who have entered the territory of either party for the purposes of receiving medical treatment.¹³

The Agreement with Slovenia

- 5.11 Typically, 2,000 Slovenians visit Australia each year. The statistics for the number of Australians who visit Slovenia are less accurate because Slovenia is part of the EU. The DHA estimates that 1,500 Australians visit Slovenia each year.¹⁴
- 5.12 Under the Agreement, an Australian visiting Slovenia who requires urgent treatment will be provided with the same quality of treatment as would be given to a Slovenian with a similar condition.¹⁵
- 5.13 According to the DHA:
- If Australians travelling to Slovenia need to see a doctor or go to a hospital whilst in Slovenia, they will simply use their passports and Medicare cards to prove their eligibility in Australia and also for the Slovenian health system and no charge will be raised.¹⁶
- 5.14 The arrangements for a Slovenian travelling in Australia will be similar.¹⁷
- 5.15 The nature of the Slovenian health care system means that occasionally, Australians seeking medical care will be faced with some out of pocket expenses.
- 5.16 The public health care scheme in Slovenia is called the Health Insurance Scheme. Most general practitioners in Slovenia are contracted under this scheme, but some are not. General practitioners who are not contracted under the Health Insurance Scheme will charge the full fee for services

12 NIA, para 5.

13 NIA, para 9.

14 NIA, para 14.

15 NIA, para 8.

16 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

17 NIA, para 11.

provided. Australians in this situation can claim a refund from the Health Insurance Institute of Slovenia.¹⁸

5.17 Similarly, some referred specialist and hospital services charge co-payments of the sort commonly experienced in Australia.¹⁹

5.18 The Agreement is expected to cost the Australian Government \$7,000 per annum.²⁰

Conclusion

5.19 The Committee notes that this Agreement is part of growing network of bilateral health care agreements with countries providing a similar standard of health care. Given an ageing population with a propensity to travel, such agreements provide an assurance to Australian travellers who are not able to obtain travel insurance that they will be appropriately cared for in time of need. The Committee supports this agreement.

Recommendation 4

The Committee supports the *Agreement Concerning the Provision of Health Care between the Government of Australia and the Government of the Republic of Slovenia* and recommends that binding treaty action be taken.

Mr Kelvin Thomson MP

Committee Chair

18 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

19 Ms Samantha Robertson, *Transcript of Evidence*, 15 March 2010, p. 14.

20 NIA, para 13.