

Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Finance and Administration Portfolio

Department of Human Services and Agencies

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2006-2007, 31 October, 2006

Question: HS27

Outcome 1, Output 1.1

Topic: Medicare Australia - Provider Numbers

Hansard Page/Written Question on Notice: Written

SENATOR EVANS asked on 31/10/2006:

1. Where are decisions about the issuance of individual Medicare provider numbers made? Please provide detailed examples?
2. How many applications does Medicare Australia receive for Medicare provider numbers a month?
3. How many of these are for GPs?
4. What proportion of these applications are made on-line?
5. What is the current period that doctors in each state and territory must wait to receive a new Medicare Provider number?
6. What is the longest time that doctors are currently waiting for a provider number? Please provide details?
7. Is there a difference in approval times for written vs on-line applications?
8. How many staff (please list per office and provide office address) are allocated to the approval and issuance of provider numbers?
9. How many requests for provider numbers each month are for doctors who are looking to work in rural and remote areas (RRMAs 4-7)? Please provide details relating to areas?
10. How many requests for provider numbers each month are for doctors looking to work in Areas of Need? Please provide details relating to areas?
11. How many requests for provider numbers each month are for newly arrived overseas trained doctors?
12. Please provide a list of the number of staff assigned to this role and the average waiting time for a provider number for each year (or financial year) since 2000.
13. With the ability of psychologists to now access Medicare services, will these psychologists need a provider number? How many staff have been assigned to do this? Are these staff additional to existing staff?

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14. How many GP provider numbers are currently operative and how many GPs hold these numbers?
15. Does the Department have a procedure for withdrawing inoperative provider numbers? Provide details of withdrawn provider numbers, per year since 2000?
16. What is the Department doing to respond to the call by the Federal Government's Regulation Task Force for the current multi-provider number system to be scrapped and for doctors to be given a single provider number?

Answer:

1. Provider number applications are processed in Medicare Australia's State headquarters and the Northern Territory Regional Office depending on the practice address of the requested provider number. Medicare Australia allocates provider numbers to medical practitioners and allied health professionals who are eligible to participate in the Medicare program.
2. Medicare Australia receives approximately 10,000 provider related applications or notifications per month. Approximately 5,000 of these are applications for a new provider number or for an extension to an existing provider number (where the provider has restricted access to Medicare benefits).
3. Approximately 65% of the provider number applications are from medical practitioners (this includes GPs, specialists and consultant physicians). No further breakdown about the medical practitioner's recognition at the time of application for a provider number is maintained.
4. Four on-line applications have been received as at 29 November 2006. The online form was introduced in May 2006.
5. Most provider number applications are processed within five working days of receipt. Some applications may take longer to process if the provider has restricted access and must satisfy other legislative requirements which require approval from other organisations (for example, the Department of Health and Ageing, the Rural Workforce Agencies).
6. Medicare Australia did not previously keep data about processing times. Records have been kept since August 2006. These records show that the longest time taken to process an application has been 25 days. This was a medical practitioner who had restricted access to Medicare benefits and who needed an exemption to access Medicare benefits. A decision on these exemptions is made by the Department of Health and Ageing.
7. No.
8. New South Wales – Number of staff 20
130 George Street
Parramatta NSW 2150
Western Australia – Number of staff 7
11th Floor, Bankwest Tower
108 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000

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Tasmania – Number of staff 1.2
242 Liverpool Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Queensland – Number of staff 22
444 Queen Street
Brisbane QLD 4000

Victoria – Number of staff 16
460 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

South Australia – Number of staff 6
209 Greenhill Road
Eastwood SA 5063

Northern Territory – Number of staff 1
Ground Floor
OIPC Building (Building Number 2)
13 Scaturchio Street
Casuarina NT 0810

9. Medicare Australia does not allocate provider numbers for doctors who are looking for work. From October 2005 - October 2006 approximately 750 applications were received and processed per month from all providers requesting provider number/s at locations in RRMA 4-7 where they were working or were about to commence work.
10. Medicare Australia is not aware of doctors who are looking for work. Medicare Australia does not determine or record Areas of Need.
11. The provider number application does not collect date of arrival.
12. Medicare Australia does not keep these statistics.
13. Yes. Provider number processing is undertaken by the provider teams in each State head quarters and the NT regional office. Additional staff have been recruited since the introduction of the Allied Health and Dental Care Initiative in July 2004 when psychologists first became eligible to access a Medicare benefit. The additional staff have not been recruited specifically to process provider applications from psychologists.
14. Based on claiming profiles 65,383 active providers were recorded in 2005-2006 financial year. 24,192 of these active providers are general practitioners or other medical practitioners. 28,102 are specialists or consultant physicians, 13,089 are allied health professionals. Active provider, means there has been some level of Medicare claiming activity but does not include providers who only refer their patients to other providers or request diagnostic imaging or pathology services for their patients.
15. Medicare provider numbers remain active until a provider closes an inactive provider number or an end date is reached. An end date may be placed on a provider number where the provider's access to Medicare benefits at the location is time limited. Medicare Australia has a process for closing a provider number when Medicare Australia is notified of a provider's death or that a provider is no longer registered with the relevant registration bodies.

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The number of Medicare provider numbers closed for the period 2000 to 2006 are:

2000 - 1,110
2001 - 1,106
2002 - 1,134
2003 - 1,241
2004 - 1,356
2005 - 2,006
2006 - 2,274 (Jan 2006 - Oct 2006)

16. The Australian Government did not agree to the Regulation Task Force recommendation to introduce a single provider number for each GP on the grounds of high implementation cost. As noted in the Government's response, the provider number is central to Medicare's operation and affects many other parties in the health system, so this would be a complex task requiring extensive consultation, resources and time to implement.

To prepare this answer it has taken approximately 27 hours at an estimated cost of \$1,359.