

HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA Inc.

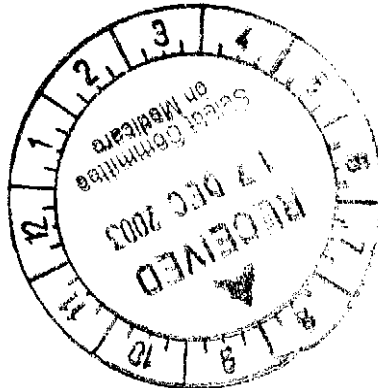
Affiliated with the Council of Australian Humanist Societies (CAHS) and
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Mr Jonathan Curtis,
Secretary,
Select Committee on Medicare,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA, ACT, 2600

Re: The Government's MedicarePLUS Proposals.

SUBMISSION FROM THE HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA. (HSV)

The HSV is a secular organisation fostering ethical, rational and responsible behaviour, human rights, the democratic processes and a just and inclusive governance.

It seeks to alleviate suffering, to promote wellbeing and the attainment of one's full potential. It engages in educational, community and charitable activities.

The views that follow have been formulated at specially convened group discussions to which all HSV members are invited. Further supportive information is obtained from print publications, the Internet, public lectures and from individuals with relevant expertise.

The Convenor of the HSV Submissions Committee is authorised to present these views.

1. HEALTH LEGISLATION AMENDMENT

We regard the universality and equity of access to high quality, publicly funded health care services as a mark of a civilised society.

The UK and continental European countries provide such services. Local experts calculate that Australia can well afford its present system; indeed they find it less costly and more efficient than the two-tier USA model of health care.

It is therefore, a matter of disappointment and regret that, in spite of pre-election promises, the Government's proposed amendments to the existing Health Legislation aim to introduce such undesirable social divisions among health care users based on their income.

2. SAFETY NET AND BULK-BILLING

The provision of a 'safety net' not only marks the end of an egalitarian system so very Australian in its nature, it introduces the notion of public health care as charity for the poor.

It was pointed out that in the long term the existence of a 'safety net' will be a disincentive for doctors to bulk-bill. They will rely on the net's compensations which however operates only above significant expenditure e.g. \$500 for families.

We support higher incentives, as well as other measures, for doctors to bulk-bill everyone. The \$5 rebate for doctors fees should not be restricted to children and concession patients but be available to all.

The argument that the well-off should not expect to be bulk-billed at the taxpayers expense, loses its plausibility in the context of the 30% rebate from taxpayers money for their private health insurance. The 2.5b used for this rebate is a very inequitable distribution of public funds.

3. RECRUITMENT OF DOCTORS

The main difficulty for Medicare is the decline in the numbers of doctors who bulk-bill. These low bulk-billing rates relate directly to the shortage of General Practitioners caused by the restriction placed on their numbers by the former Health Minister, Dr. Wooldridge.

The proposed measures to increase the numbers of GPs are therefore very welcome. The provision for additional graduates from Australian universities - provided the students can afford the cost of study - is a wise investment for the future. And the recruitment of more nurses for busy medical practices will be of immediate benefit. We strongly support both measures.

3. cont.

The recruitment of foreign doctors would provide a rapid relief to the current shortage of GPs.

We suggest that they should be selected from the well qualified and be experienced. They should be required to complete a short 'crash course' on specifically local conditions e.g. Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses etc.

Several months' work, under supervision, in a public hospital's wards, casualty and intensive care would appear a useful required introduction to the standards of our health care.

4. SUNSET CLAUSE

The success of the MedicarePlus package is largely predicated on an increase in the rates of bulk-billing.

In view of the uncertainty of such an outcome, we urge that the Bill be given a short sunset clause to enable a review of its effect.

Yours sincerely,

Halina Strnad

Halina Strnad,
convenor, submissions committee.
16.12.03.