



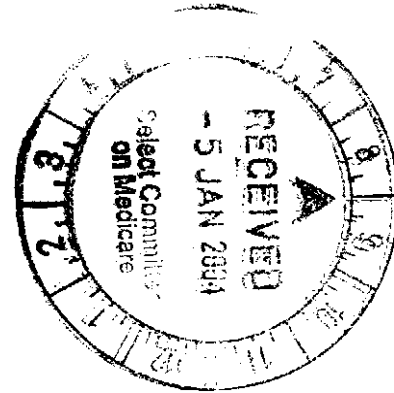
## City of Whittlesea

Enquiries: Ruth Spielman 9217-2315

File Reference: 159349

22 December 2003

Mr Jonathan Curtis  
Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on Medicare  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear Mr Curtis

### Response to Medicare PLUS proposals

Thank you for your invitation to submit to the re-established Senate Select Committee on Medicare.

Council is concerned that the revised Medicare reform package will not meet the growing and diverse needs of the residents of the City of Whittlesea.

In particular the following issues are of concern.

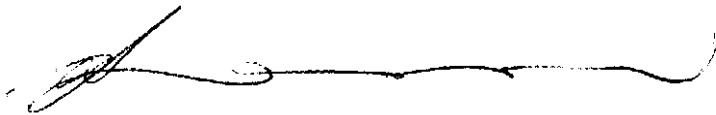
1. Universal access to bulk billing is critical to an area of high disadvantage such as Whittlesea. The reforms as announced in Council's view do not provide sufficient incentive for GP's to continue to bulk bill. The increase in the rebate fee for card holders and children under 16 will do little to address this problem. Council believes that all residents regardless of income should have access to free health care when they need it, a service paid for through the taxation system. The mounting of bulk billing services on a viable financial footing would see GP's return to the workforce, offer a different range of services (including after hours and emergency services) and provide an opportunity to residents to benefit from improved health care practice.
2. In addition to ensuring that bulk billing services are financially viable, additional efforts should be made to address the shortage of GP's within Whittlesea. As an outer suburban municipality, with a significant rural sector and rapidly growing suburbs, the provision of GPs has become a major gap in the primary care health system for our residents. The work force issues can be addressed by:
  - Ensuring that Whittlesea is designated as a priority area for workforce assistance.

- Ensuring that sufficient places for overseas-trained doctors are allocated to Whittlesea. This would take advantage of overseas qualified doctors currently living in the municipality but not able to practice.
  - Allocating the proposed nurse practitioner places to service rural, isolated and newly established suburbs as well as complementing existing GP and allied health services.
  - Developing a staff attraction and retention program not only for GP's but for all health services struggling to cope with rising service demand. Many of these services, similar to the experience of rural and remote communities are unable to attract suitable applicants to fill vacant positions.
3. Additionally in order to ensure that current GP services are able to cope with increased levels of population, the provision of resources that will boost the publicly available allied health service system is essential. The development of the system to appropriate levels will reduce the reliance of the community on GPs and Hospital emergency departments as the only available source of primary health care.
4. Council is also concerned that low income earners who do not qualify for a health card will miss out on the Government's proposed bulk billing incentives. While this is acknowledged with the introduction of the safety net measures, what will stop those measures being used by specialists and diagnostic services to increase fees? This approach requires further review.

Council has taken a leadership role locally to ensure that required health and community services are provided to residents. The reform of Medicare is a key factor in ensuring that residents in Whittlesea are able to access a robust health care system. Council looks forward to continuing to work with the Commonwealth Government to ensuring that is achieved.

Should you require further information please contact Ruth Spielman, Director Community Services on 9217-2315.

Yours sincerely



**Graeme Brennan**  
**Chief Executive Officer**