

HEALTH UPDATE



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Federal Budget Health News

As anticipated, there was little by way of good health news in the May Budget. The Government's 'MedicarePlus' package, now known as 'Strengthening Medicare', will benefit only some Australians and most will face continued growth in out-of-pocket GP and specialist costs. In our view, the inflationary impact of already spiralling specialist costs in particular, will test the willingness of government to rebate costs above the safety net threshold long term and we predict a return of the Government's private health insurance cover proposal once the election and the spending spree is over.

The safety net is also very unfair to single people. A heterosexual couple without children can pool their costs to reach \$300 or \$700 depending

on whether they are concession card holders or not, whereas single people and same sex couples cannot, regardless of their circumstances.



Meantime, the Budget overlooked some glaring areas of need, including

- Support for mental health programmes and services
- Initiatives to address public dental services waiting times and oral health needs more generally
- Public funding for midwife services
- Equitable health funding for Indigenous Australians
- Serious efforts to limit smoking and alcohol misuse.

Medicare ads

Glaring too has been the blitz of Medicare TV and press ads. The Medicare booklet was mailed out to all householders, well before there was agreement with doctors on how the allied health package would be implemented! (It has now been agreed and was re-launched early this month but, again, will be available to only a limited number of chronically ill people.)

The Medicare information campaign alone cost around \$21 million and another \$100 million in pre-election advertising is expected. The Democrats strongly oppose this waste of taxpayers' money and point out that it is contrary to the current Auditor-General's guidelines. We have quizzed ministers and put forward amendments to reign in this practice but it appears the Government is beyond embarrassing.

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WOMEN'S HEALTH

The International Decade for Women - 1976 to 1985 - brought to public notice many issues of particular concern to women, including their health status. After consultation with over one million women across Australia, the National Women's Health Policy was launched in April 1989, signed off by Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers and endorsed at various stages by both Liberal and Labor governments.

Since the late 1990's government interest has waned and it is clear that this Health Minister has what remains of women's health services in the gun. For instance:

- Programs like the promotion of women's health, alternative birthing services, sexual assault, female genital mutilation education and women's health services in rural communities have been dropped from the draft public health funding agreement (PHOFA) currently under negotiation with the states.

- The Government has also pushed responsibility for family planning onto the states with only a limited term of funding guaranteed.

- The important 20 year longitudinal study of women's health being conducted by Newcastle University is forced to go cap-in-hand to the Government every two years,



despite being only half-way through the study program. The University had no contract and received no funding for most of last year and was only included in the May budget

after strong pressure on the Government by the Democrats.

- Minister Abbott announced in June that he would restrict emergency contraception to prescription only availability. Since January this year Postinor 2 has been available over the counter from pharmacies but its sale is subject to strict pharmacist guidelines. It turns out that the decision last year to permit its sale without prescription was made by a body made up largely of state ministers and fortunately cannot be overturned without their agreement!

- The Howard Government has apparently pulled its legislation that would give parents an automatic right to access their 15 year old's government medical records without their consent. The Democrats joined doctors and youth workers around the country in saying it was important that confidential health care and advice should be available to young people if they need it.

Back in the 1980's Australia's women's health services were cutting edge and the envy of women in other countries. The Democrats won't let this Government get away with mainstreaming women's health for the sake of appeasing what we suspect are narrow conservative interests.

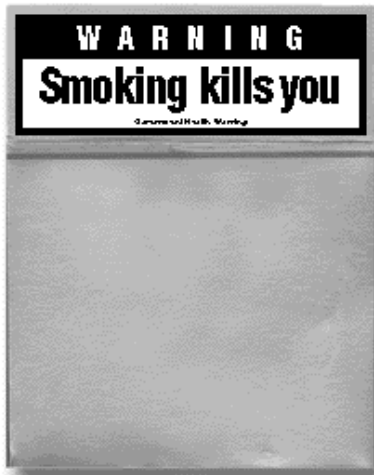
Photos: www.ihomebirth.com
www.unimelb.edu.au
www.daviddsemsheadquarters.com

“... there is great interest within the complementary health care sector in solving some of the difficulties ...”

Tobacco

The Democrats want tougher measures to limit the disastrous impact of the tobacco industry on the health of Australians and over the last few months, we have:

- Strongly supported an ALP amendment in the Senate that stopped tobacco companies from taking advantage of a *statute of limitations* cap on public liability proposed by Government. Unamended, this bill would have prevented people suing tobacco companies whose cancers and other smoking related illnesses emerged in later years.



- Spoken out against the Government's cave-in to tobacco companies in delaying the recommended new graphic health warnings on cigarette packages and by reducing the size of these warnings on the front of cigarette packages from 50% to 30%; and

- Initiated a Senate inquiry into the Democrats bill banning highly misleading terms such as

'mild' and 'light', banning the promotion and sale of tobacco on the Internet and making it illegal for film makers to take payment for showing tobacco products or smoking in movies. The inquiry will also examine the ALP bill that would stop tobacco donations to political parties and the ACCC's repeated failure to take legal action against tobacco companies for their misleading and unconscionable conduct. The report of the inquiry will be available in August.

Vaccine – Better Late than Never

The Democrats drew attention to the fact that the government had ignored advice from its own expert advisory body urging it to publicly fund pneumococcal vaccine. Pneumococcal disease is more common than meningococcal C (the vaccine that is publicly funded), has a higher fatality rate and causes a higher rate of permanent and serious disability. Half of all children who contract pneumococcal meningitis during the first year of life are left permanently disabled and about 11% will die.

Two years on, the Federal Government has agreed to fund the vaccine for all newborn babies and people over 65 and a catch-up program for toddlers - a real win for public health.

The funding of a new polio vaccine and a vaccine to

protect children against chickenpox was also recommended. Whether the government will subsidise these vaccinations remains to be seen.

Complementary Health Care

In May, the Democrats hosted forums in Sydney and Melbourne to discuss reforms for the complementary health care industry with consumers, health professionals, manufacturers and academics. This input ensures the Democrats are well informed in our campaign for better regulation and support for complementary health care.



Brighthope

Myers

Keynote presentations were provided by Professor Stephen Myers, who spoke on appropriate regulation for complementary medicines from a public health perspective; Professor Ian Brighthope, took up the case for a separate National Complementary Health Authority; Professor David Briggs, discussed the role of the Therapeutic Goods Administration and Bill Pearson commented on the progress so

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far on practitioner regulation.

The enthusiastic involvement of the audience on both evenings showed that there is great interest within the complementary health care sector in solving some of the difficulties the industry is facing. The Democrats will launch our complementary health policy platform once Mr Howard names the election day and we will give it a high priority during the campaign.

Higher Costs for Patients No Fix for PBS

In a surprise ALP black flip in the last June sitting week, the government finally got its 30% increase in the co-payment for prescription drugs on the PBS. Concession card holders will now pay \$4.60 for prescription drugs and everyone else will pay \$28.60. The cut-in level for the PBS safety net has also been increased.

We say that shifting costs to the sick will stop many people from being able to afford necessary medication and do nothing to



address the waste and inefficiency in the PBS system.

Instead of hitting patients, the government could have reduced costs by

- Encouraging the take-up of cheaper, generic drugs;
- Cracking down on the use of expensive drugs on non-prescribed conditions;
- Promoting the use of alternative, cheaper complementary health products with proven effectiveness for many conditions
- Tendering out the flat wholesale distribution costs; and
- Decreasing the need for drugs through greater illness prevention.

The Democrats are fiercely opposed to increasing co-payments, as we were when the government tried this in 2002, and 2003. We moved

amendments that would have forced a proper examination of other cost cutting measures before the co-payment increases came into force but the Government and Labor voted them down.

Free Trade and the PBS

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is also likely to push up the cost of the PBS because the new processes will delay the manufacture of cheaper generic versions of drugs and costs for getting them onto the market are likely to be much higher. This, coupled with the changes to the listing process and the appeals provisions that enable US pharmaceutical companies to challenge listing decisions, make the FTA utterly unacceptable to us. We understand the enabling legislation for the FTA will be dealt with in the Senate and sadly it appears that Labor will support it.