

HEALTH UPDATE



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INDEPENDENTS GIVE UP UNIVERSALITY

The Government finally got its MedicarePlus package passed after reaching agreement with the four independent senators on the following measures:

Safety net - \$300 for concession card and family tax benefit recipients & \$700 for everyone else;

Rebate - \$7.50 rebate for GPs when they bulk-bill concession card holders and children in rural areas. The higher rebate also applies to all of Tasmania (home to two of the independents) and \$5 for everywhere else;

Allied health - GPs can contract to allied health workers or practice nurses for people aged over 75 or with a chronic illness;

Medical training - 12 extra places in Queensland, (where the One Nation Independent hails from); and,



Medical records - an online trial in Tasmania and Meg Lees' state of South Australia.

WHAT'S WRONG

The safety net will make specialist fees more affordable in the short term, and will help those with spiralling health care costs. But there are real doubts about how sustainable it will be in the absence of any further Government involvement in specialist fee setting.

The Senate Inquiry pointed to the many unfair anomalies created by two safety nets where, for instance, low income working people without children won't qualify for the lower threshold.

It's doubtful that \$7.50 extra in GP rebates in rural areas will stop further falls in bulk-billing rates without a target. The increase will also not help anyone who is not a concession card holder or child.

While superficially attractive, the allied health measure is bound to fail. GPs hate extra administration. They have already said they would rather refer patients and not have to deal with service contracts and payments.

Sadly, this is just an election-driven grabbag of policy sweeteners, taking us further from the Medicare principles of public health insurance for all.

LOST OPPORTUNITY

Instead of this disappointing package, there was potential to get well-considered policy at the same cost.

The Democrats wanted:

- one safety net threshold at \$500 which would be fair and reasonable to all;
- \$5 extra for every consultation bulk billed, provided a target was met; and;
- allied health professionals to get the MBS rebate in their own right, through GP referral.

DEMOCRATS WIN REVIEW

Our successful amendment to the safety net legislation will at least deliver a review in three years to assess the consequences of the package.

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SPOT THE DIFFERENCE: Half the drinks above are alcopops and half are soft drinks. Photo ADGP

TEMPTATION TOO SWEET FOR TEENS

Research late last year by the Australian Divisions of General Practice shows that alcopops are the most popular alcoholic drink amongst young people, with children as young as 12 bingeing on 8 or more a night.

We say alcopops should be banned if they can be confused for soft drinks and are marketed to underage children. Labelling and packaging standards should make it clear that alcopops are alcoholic products - usually around 5% alcohol which is equivalent to full strength beer. There is no safe level of alcohol consumption for minors.

Senator Allison and Dr Chesterfield-Evans' submission to the NSW Government review proposing more change, is available at:

www.democrats.org.au

COMPLEMENTARY HEALTH IGNORED

The Government continues its vendetta against complementary healthcare products with ongoing recalls, unreasonable demands for testing and expensive audits. This is absurd for medicines that are low risk, non-addictive and have far fewer side effects than pharmaceuticals.

Answers to Democrats questions reveal 1643 complaints from 2000 - 2003 against the drug Zyban or bupropion and 31 reported deaths. The National Report on Patient Safety shows around 140,000 hospital admissions were for adverse reactions to medicines between 1999 and 2000. Despite this, the Government has not cancelled the registration of any pharmaceuticals and says:

TGA does not take action against a medicine on the basis of raw numbers of adverse reaction reports.

There are around 250,000 prescriptions of Ritalin or methylphenidate a year under the PBS, commonly for ADHD in children and, despite 3 reports of deaths associated with its use, the NHMRC is not funding research on its effects on children and can't say whether any research is being done in Australia at all.

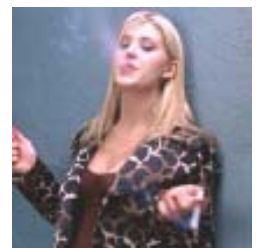
We have drawn attention to the very low level of investment in research by Government in complementary health (\$65,000 in 2000/1) - an issue also identified in

the report of the Expert Committee on Complementary Medicines.

Pharmaceuticals are subsidised by around \$5 billion a year and receive \$200 million for research. By contrast, complementary health consumers pay around \$1.5 billion a year for products and receive no subsidy. Indeed they pay the GST on most items.

AXE TOBACCO ROLE IN MOVIES

The incidents of smoking in films is at its highest for fifty years and according to research published in



The Lancet, adolescents exposed to smoking in films are almost 3 times more likely to smoke.

Tobacco companies pay millions of dollars to have smoking featured in films in a blatant attempt to glamorise the habit and hook young people.

The Democrats have introduced the Tobacco Advertising (Film, Internet and Misleading Promotion) Amendment Bill 2004 to ban inducements for tobacco product placement in films, prohibit the sale of tobacco products on the Internet and tighten the Tobacco Advertising Act.

This bill would also prohibit use of misleading terms mild and light, menthol, low tar and special filter.

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