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People power wins victory in battle against co-payment, but war for Medicare far from over

Health Minister Sussan Ley's announcement that the hated GP co-payment has been dropped is welcome news. But Save Medicare Sydney warns that Medicare is not safe while the rebate remains frozen and the government looks for other ways to dismantle universal healthcare:

"From the moment a Medicare co-payment was floated in January 2014 public opposition has been overwhelming. Today's announcement vindicates the efforts of all those who have organised that opposition and built it into a movement in support of universal healthcare. We congratulate all the community groups, welfare organisations and unions that have stood up against user-pays and laid the basis for today's victory" said Ms Jean Parker from Save Medicare Sydney.

However Save Medicare Sydney warns that Medicare is not yet safe, and are preparing their supporters for a new phase in the campaign:

"Even in dumping the co-payment Minister Ley continued the anti-Medicare tirade that the government has waged for the last year. Prime Minister Abbott and Ley want Medicare bulk-billing to become a safety-net for the "vulnerable". The government wants to break the universal nature of Medicare that keeps the system fair. Medicare bulk-billing is for all patients, not just the very poor. Community support for keeping Medicare universal is now irrefutable. When will this government get the message?"

Save Medicare Sydney calls for the Abbott government to reverse its freeze on the indexation of the Medicare rebate:

"'Pausing' the Medicare rebate amounts to a financial assault on Medicare. Bulk-billing GPs in working-class areas and Aboriginal health centres are absorbing the cuts. This cannot go on. The rebate must be fully restored immediately" said Save Medicare's Ms Amy Thomas.

"Abbott's rebate freeze is history repeating. The Howard government reduced bulk-billing rates by 20% by freezing the rebate. This meant rural communities and low-income workers and pensioners could not access a GP. But a determined campaign to Save Medicare forced Howard to reverse the freeze and put in place measures to encourage bulk-billing. Abbott must immediately restore the level of Medicare rebates in line with increasing operating costs for GPs" said Ms Parker.

Save Medicare also called for the expansion of Medicare to dentistry and a crack-down on out-of-pocket specialist and pharmaceutical costs. By scrapping the Private Insurance Rebate the government could pump \$5 billion into Medicare and public health to benefit all the community:

"The people have spoken – they want Medicare built up, not pulled down. Australians pay the second highest out of pocket health costs in the OECD and these costs need to be reduced if Medicare is to be truly universal. The inclusion of dentistry in Medicare is a priority. A government that truly cared about accessible health would also put a stop to the outrageous fees being charged by some specialists and the costs of medicines" said Ms Thomas.

"This government can't be trusted. Until the government gives an unqualified guarantee that Medicare will remain fully funded and universal, the campaign to Save Medicare will continue" said Ms Parker.

For comment:

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