



Media Release

Senator Mathias Cormann *Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health Administration*

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GOVERNMENT SHOULD RECONSIDER CATARACT REBATE CUT!

The Rudd Labor government should immediately reverse its decision to halve rebates for cataract surgery in light of evidence before Senate Estimates.

"The evidence is clear, this is a very ill-considered, short-sighted budget cut, which if allowed to go ahead would hurt patients, most of them elderly," Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Health Administration Mathias Cormann said.

"The government's 50% cut of Medicare rebates for cataract surgery does nothing to reduce doctors' fees. The government conceded they have no control over doctors' fees.

"All it will do is push up the cost for patients, many of whom will no longer be able to afford access to this life changing procedure through the private system," he said.

Medibank Private Managing Director George Savvides confirmed this week that its rebates for cataract surgery would automatically be cut by a further \$290 as a result of the government cut.

"Private health fund rebates are invariably linked to MBS fee/rebate arrangements. Coming on top of the government's \$313 rebate cut this will result in increased costs for patients of more than \$600 per procedure.

"As more and more patients are forced into the already overburdened public system, there are no savings for the health system either.

"The Rudd government wants to save \$313 per procedure, forcing taxpayers to pay more than \$3,500 to fund free access to the same procedure in the public system¹.

"At least for those lucky enough to get in," Senator Cormann said.

Answers from Health Department officials to questions in Senate Estimates have revealed that:

- More than 70% of nearly 200,000 cataract surgery procedures are performed in the private system;
- The rebate for cataract surgery covers the service during surgery itself as well as a period of post-operative care, including further consultations;
- The government has no idea how long cataract surgery actually takes, given they do not collect such data, either through the MBS or otherwise;
- Departmental officials did not dispute the findings of an AMA survey that 70% of ophthalmologists take between 25-40 minutes for cataract surgery, not the 15-20 minutes advanced by the Minister without any tangible evidence;

¹ NSW Health, Cost of Care, 'Removal of a cataract = \$3,579

http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/hospitals/going_to_hospital/cost_of_care_combo.asp

- The cataract surgery rebates have already been cut twice, by 30% in 1987 and 10% in 1996, undermining assertions by the Minister that this 50% cut is necessary to cater for improvements 'since the rebate was first introduced';
- The value of the rebate has been cut further over time, given the average 2% indexation per annum in other years was well below the Health Services Cost Index (+186% since 1989), Health CPI (+162% since 1989), increases in average weekly earnings (+106% since 1989), or even just CPI (+71% since 1989).

Health Department officials confirmed that if the Senate disallowed the government's drastic rebate cut for cataract surgery, the relevant items would revert back to the previous rebates.

"Nicola Roxon has again been found wanting on all this. She clearly didn't think through the implications for patients and the health system," Senator Cormann said.

"This is yet another battle she engaged in as part of Labor's long-running ideological crusade against private health, irrespective of what it means for patients.

"The Rudd Labor government is intent on forcing elderly patients needing access to life changing cataract surgery to pay the price for its reckless spending and that is completely inappropriate," he said.

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