



# Piers Akerman

**ON SUNDAY**

# The eyes have it: Minister must go

**I**n the field of medical procedures, there are two operations that are considered truly liberating — cataract removal and hip replacement.

Both have the capacity to rejuvenate and liberate the most disadvantaged people in our community — the elderly — and both are under siege by ideologically motivated, radical Left Health Minister Nicola Roxon.

Cruelly and wilfully, those in need of these liberating procedures have been left to suffer as Roxon prosecutes her class war against the medical profession.

Slashing the Medicare rebate for the most common type of cataract surgery by more than \$280 from today will punish unnecessarily thousands of patients who will now be unable to afford better vision — and increase the number of those already waiting in the public system.

As Liberal senator Mathias Cormann said yesterday: “Those who can’t afford access to life-changing cataract surgery in the private system and can’t get into the public system (because the queues are too long) will have their eyesight deteriorate further, facing the completely preventable, worst-case scenario of blindness.

“Cataract surgery is a very cost-effective, preventive health measure, helping to prevent falls, fractures, mental distress and social isolation among elderly patients.

“The social and economic cost, on top of the cost to the health system from falls, fractures and mental distress, far outweighs the savings Roxon is seeking to achieve.”

Roxon, playing the politics of envy, hopes the public will think ophthalmologists are responsible for their pain — but that’s just more Labor spin.

While she has been campaigning against eye professionals, claiming they are making millions from a simple operation, the Senate Estimates Committee has heard that government bean-counters actually have no idea how long cataract surgery takes, as they don’t collect such data.

Roxon has claimed the procedure takes 15 to 20 minutes, but an AMA survey suggests 70 per cent of ophthalmologists take between 25 and 40 minutes to perform it.

Similarly, while attempting to fan resentment against doctors, Roxon didn’t mention the reality that cutting rebates does nothing to reduce their fees, as the government has no control over the fee structure.

Her argument — that cuts to the rebate are necessary to cater for technological improvements — also falls over, as she failed to mention that cataract surgery rebates have been cut twice before, by 30 per cent in 1987 and 10 per cent in 1996.

Roxon’s goal is to destroy the medical profession through a campaign of denigration and assault on the integrity of doctors. Her desire is to replace medical professionals with cheaper, less qualified nurses.

It’s two years since Kevin Rudd, then opposition leader, promised to take over the nation’s hospitals if the States didn’t “fix up” their problems. That election pledge is now clearly one of the Rudd government’s many broken promises.

The only sign of progress has been a National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission report recommending that Canberra take more control (and insert more levels of bureaucracy in the process).

The report has 292 pages and 123 recommendations, most of which reveal a profound ignorance of the key factor in health delivery — the doctor-patient relationship — and show a morbid obsession with management by administrators and bureaucrats.

As Professor David Penington, former leader of the Hawke government’s AIDS task force and senior fellow of the Grattan Institute, told me, basic issues — quality and safety of care, correct diagnosis and choice of treatment, all things that doctors are there to deliver — are constantly ignored by administrators and bureaucrats concerned only with numbers.

Roxon’s performance as a minister doesn’t rate. It would appear she has no regard for public accountability nor any respect for our parliamentary democracy.

Her sole negotiating tactic is to demonise her opponent de jour and refuse to respond to any legitimate criticism.



When the Rudd government slashed rebates for chemotherapy, Roxon blamed pharmacists; when it hacked into health insurance, she targeted wealthier people; when it launched its attack on alcopops, she tried to hang the distillers out to dry.

Her belief that more bureaucracy is the solution to health-industry problems flies in the face of the experience of the states.

A recent study of the decrepit NSW

public health system showed that expenditure on administrators and their staff had soared to almost \$3 billion, out of a \$7 billion budget, yet quality of care had diminished.

Prime Minister Rudd appointed Roxon as his Health Minister, and he should be aware by now that she is a failure in this portfolio. She must be moved: the health of the nation is too precious to be left in her inept hands.



Must go: Health Minister Nicola Roxon