



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HEALTH LEGISLATION

AMENDMENT (MEDICARE) BILL 2003

Consideration of Senate Message

SPEECH

Thursday, 11 March 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Gillard, Julia, MP

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Ms GILLARD (Lalor) (1.38 pm)—It is not the intention of the opposition to frustrate the vote on this proposition, and obviously we are in the run-up to question time. Having said that, I think that the Australian public should note the unseemly haste with which this government is proceeding to kill Medicare, because that is what this piece of legislation is about and what it has always been about. It is what the Howard government's health policy has always been about.

Let us make no mistake about this: Medicare, as Labor built it, is a universal health system with bulk-billing as its backbone and the promise of Medicare always was reasonable access to bulk-billing—not that every Australian would always have a bulk-billed consultation, not that 100 per cent of doctors would bulk-bill, but that all Australians would have reasonable access to bulk-billing. The essence of universality is that every Australian gets the same fair go. This is the end of universal Medicare as we know it, because from this day forth every Australian will not get the same fair go under Medicare. Your access to Medicare—your access to bulk-billing—will be entirely dependent on your age, your income and on where you live, and the government has picked the 'where you live' part on the basis of electoral need, not health need.

This is the end of universal Medicare as we know it. If it is not universal, it is not Medicare, so it is the end of Medicare as we know it. The Australian public do not need to take my word for that; they can take the word of Professor Deeble—the architect of Medicare who designed it for implementation by the Hawke Labor government—who is telling anyone who will listen in Australia today that this is the death of Medicare. This government wants Medicare killed today and it is prepared to deal with the parliamentary procedures with this unseemly haste to make sure that it gets Medicare in the coffin today. That is what it will be achieving through this vote and votes later today.

Whilst the government is ultimately achieving the aim it set for itself—that is, the aim of killing Medicare—in part it is doing it behind a sham safety net. The proposition that the Senate has voted on is about creating a sham safety net for Australians, not a universal health system. We only need the sham safety net because this government has not properly invested in Medicare. It has not properly invested in the GP end of Medicare, where of course bulk-billing rates have plummeted under this government from the 80 per cent that they were under Labor to 64 per cent in the last quarter—the worst bulk-billing rates for 15 years. That, of course, is what has happened to GP access under this government, but it has not invested in other parts of Medicare either—the parts of Medicare that allow people to have access to specialists and to other sorts of medical services. Because it always wanted to kill Medicare—that was always the result that it wanted—it did not want to make that investment.

The government hoped that, if they averted their eyes long enough, the Australian people would avert their eyes long enough for them to kill Medicare while no-one was looking. Fortunately, the Labor Party were looking and it is the Labor Party's bulk-billing campaign that has caused this government to make any form of major health statement in this term. This government were never going to make a major health statement about Medicare; they were going to hope no-one noticed while Medicare died. It is because we went out there campaigning for bulk-billing that people did notice. The first attempt—the laughably named 'A Fairer Medicare' attempt—was enacted and then withdrawn. It not only fell but the health minister who introduced it also fell. We then got the current health minister, who has done so many backflips on this package he will be in need of chiropractic care. But even after all those backflips, the essence of this package still remains, at its heart, the destruction of a universal health system, the destruction of Medicare and the use of a sham safety net to try and hide that true intention from the Australian people.

Everybody should know that this sham safety net will make 95 per cent of Australians worse off—worse off because they will never get anywhere near the sham safety net. (*Extension of time granted*) They will be worse off because not only will 95 per cent of Australians never get anywhere near the sham safety net but, of course, as we know, the very existence of the sham safety net, particularly as it is figured off actual costs, will likely lead to price escalation in health fees. You do not have to believe negative things about doctors or specialists

to believe that; all you have to believe is that they are rational responders to the price signals that government sends them. So 95 per cent of Australians will be worse off under this sham safety net arrangement. Of the five per cent who notionally benefit, about half of them, according to Professor Deeble, are actually better off under current arrangements.

This is a fundamentally irrational plan to spend that amount of money to make 95 per cent of Australians worse off, 2½ per cent no better off and 2½ per cent possibly notionally better off. Why would you spend \$400 million doing that? There obviously would be a cheaper, more targeted and more effective way. This government was not interested in the cheaper, targeted, effective way, because what it wanted was not a health policy; it wanted a political curtain behind which to kill Medicare. The sham safety net is the political curtain, because it is hoping that Australians are foolish enough to be reassured by the words 'safety net' and not to tumble to the con that is going on here. They are going to tumble to the con, because they are going to know—and certainly in the coming weeks and months Labor will ensure everyone knows—that the sham safety net is no more than the curtain behind which to kill Medicare.

In relation to the other aspects of the package—the much vaunted allied health aspects of the package—which would have given Australians the view that somehow they were going to be assisted to go to allied health professionals and dentists, the bad news is this: the allied health initiatives are incredibly limited to people with chronic and complex ailments. Even in the government's own figures it is only going to benefit 150,000 Australians. What about the rest of the 20 million? If you think that is bad, have a look at dental—the much vaunted dental initiative. When you actually look at it, you see a backflip of spectacular magnitude, given that the Prime Minister was in this House just a week ago saying that dental was not anything to do with the Commonwealth, it was ridiculous, he would never believe that and it never should be done. We all know how expendable John Howard's views are when he sees a political advantage.

We have this much vaunted so-called dental initiative, and when you look at the detail you see it will benefit 23,000 people. They will get \$220—an initiative costing less than \$5 million in a year. What about the rest of the 20 million Australians? How does that shabby, cruel joke compare with Labor's plan to provide \$120 million per year for dental care, to get 500,000 Australians off waiting lists and into dentists' chairs and to forever ensure that public dental care in this country is focused on prevention and restoration instead of waiting until people are bleeding and in pain before they get any care? That is the shabby, cruel trick in this package about dental care.

I conclude by saying this: Australians would be clearly better off under Labor's \$1.9 billion bulk-billing plan, compared with the minister's \$1 billion plan. The difference is this: ours is a plan for all Australians; it is not to divide Australians up. Australians would be clearly better off under Labor's dental plan of \$120 million per year to help half a million Australians get off waiting lists and to forever put them in a better position than under the minister's plan. This minister's health care plan will equal the death of Medicare. We are going to oppose it today, we are going to continue opposing it every day between now and the next election, and we are going to ensure that the next election is a referendum about whether people want Medicare in this country.