



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

ADJOURNMENT

Budget

SPEECH

Thursday, 29 May 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 4947
Questioner
Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (12:33): I rise today to raise an issue of great concern in my local community and, indeed, of great concern right around the country. This is this government's appalling proposal to bring in co-payments for Medicare. This effectively dismantles our universal healthcare system that has served our country so well.

We know that for many years it was coalition policy to dismantle Medicare. In 1996, however, John Howard saw the light and realised that our Medicare universal healthcare system should not be dismantled. Unfortunately, those on the other side now have not had such wisdom. The minister has now really introduced a very retrograde step by introducing co-payments.

I hear from the minister that it is important to have a price signal out there—a price signal to get people to think twice about whether or not they really need to go to a doctor. Well, this is going to have significant impacts on communities right around the country and particularly in my local community. Of course, those who will question whether or not they can afford it are those on the lowest incomes. It is people who are perhaps on low incomes or who have large families who will question whether they really need to go and see a doctor. That can have devastating impacts on our health and the health of this country. That is what I am so confused about.

If we want to ensure that the burden of disease reduces on our country then surely we should be investing in prevention. This is what going to see the GP is often about. It is about getting a test, or a prostate examination, a pap smear or, indeed, being immunised. Under the new co-payment arrangement, it will cost \$7 each time you go to the doctor. Those on the other side have said that it is not very much; it is just a couple of middies or a couple of packets of cigarettes. They are not living in the real world. At the train stations last week, people were directly telling me that this government is out of touch. They do not understand what it is like to live in the real world. One example, a hypothetical, is a trip to the doctor where you would pay \$7; you then have to get a blood test, which would be another \$7; and then you have to go back to the doctor to get the results, which would be another \$7. So what we are really talking about is a \$21 fee to go to the doctor.

It is not just me saying this and it is not just the Labor Party saying this. Indeed, many medical organisations have come out clearly stating their opposition to this measure. The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners said that every Australian should feel comfortable about accessing clinically appropriate health care, regardless of location, cost or timing—something this model has completely undercut. The Rural Doctors Association Vice President, Dr John Hall, said the co-payment will impact significantly on rural patients, who are amongst the poorest in our country, making it difficult for them to afford basic health care. The Rural Doctors Association also said that the scheme will lead to those unable to afford a GP consultation seeking treatment at their local hospitals, resulting in extra pressure on the hospital system. As we know, seeing a GP is a lot cheaper than presenting to a hospital and taking up a hospital bed.

It is a very short-sighted policy of those on the other side to say, 'Let's have a price point to deter people from going to the doctor' when this is going to have ramifications in other parts of the system. Of course, the answer of those on the other side is: 'Let's just charge them to go to emergency. Let's just put another cost barrier in the way of them getting decent health care.' I fundamentally reject that principle. I do not believe that your health care, whether or not you get good health care or, indeed, whether or not you live or die, should rely on how much money you have in your pocket. I think it is that serious that we need to be paying a lot of attention to this.

In my electorate I am running a petition. I have had hundreds and hundreds of people sign that petition in a very short period of time. I will ensure that I report those results to the House. People are clearly saying that they do not believe that a co-payment will achieve the outcomes that they want, which is good health care for everyone, wherever they live and whatever means they have. We want to ensure that they get decent health care. We do not want to become America. The Americanised system costs more and it delivers less to low-income families. So I urge the government to listen to the people of Australia.