

Year in Review

January



AMA President Professor Brian Owler with Health Minister Sussan Ley

As the holiday season hit its peak, AMA President Professor Brian Owler warned Australian families that too many lives were being needlessly lost on our roads, and advised drivers to adhere to speed limits, don't drink and drive, and do not drive when fatigued. Meanwhile, the AMA's fight against the Government's proposed GP co-payments continued, with the President writing to Prime Minister Abbott urging him to personally intervene to stop the changes. AMA Vice President Dr Stephen Parnis said that the capacity crisis strangling the UK health system would be replicated in Australia if the Government continued its attacks on general practice and primary care. The AMA released internal research that graphically illustrated the potential impact of co-payments on Australian household incomes, with a \$20 cut in Medicare patient rebates for standard GP consultations, and a total of \$1.3 billion being ripped out of general practice. Strong leadership and lobbying from the AMA resulted in the Government abandoning its planned changes to Level A and Level B Medicare patient rebates for GP visits. Professor Owler congratulated new Health Minister Sussan Ley on the Government's decision, but advised that the AMA still strongly opposed plans to cut the Medicare patient rebate by \$5, freeze Medicare rebate indexation, and introduce co-payments.

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February



GP Forum in Sydney to discuss Government's Medicare reforms

A new report from the Productivity Commission confirmed that general practice was the most efficient and cost-effective part of the Australian health system. Professor Owler said that the report was further evidence that the Government's attacks on general practice were unwarranted, ill-directed, and politically unwise. The AMA presented to the Senate Committee on Health, and outlined the devastating effects that the Government's co-payment and freeze policies would have on patients, especially the poor and disadvantaged. The AMA conducted a series of doctor forums across the country to discuss the Government's destructive Medicare reforms. As PM Tony Abbott survived a leadership spill vote, the AMA called on the PM to



urgently intervene and dump his Government's bad health policies, most notably the co-payment, rebate cut, and freeze. The latest Close the Gap Campaign Report showed that targets for life expectancy, reduced mortality rates, and other key performance indicators for Indigenous health were not being met. Professor Owler said greater effort and funding was needed to address the social determinants of health, and that primary health care was an important part of the close the gap strategy. In response to the damning Human Rights Commission report on the health and treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, the AMA again called for an independent panel to monitor health services, and for children to be removed from detention. The AMA Specialist Trainee Survey revealed a high level of satisfaction with trainees' work and training experiences. Following representations from the AMA, the WMA, and other national medical associations, the Turkish Government dropped charges against doctors who assisted people who were injured in protests.

March



Professor Owler speaks to media after the Government scrapped the GP co-payment

The Government dumped its latest co-payment proposals, with Prime Minister Tony Abbott declaring that all co-payment plans were "dead, buried, and cremated". At a Parliament House media conference, Professor Owler welcomed the Government's decision to back away from its decision to cut the Medicare patient rebate by \$5 – the so-called optional co-payment – but called for the Government to go further and lift the freeze on Medicare rebate indexation. Against a backdrop of revelations of incidents of bullying and harassment in medical workplaces, the AMA used International Women's Day to condemn harassment, acknowledge the magnificent achievements of women in medicine, and applaud the profession for its hallmarks of fairness

and gender equality. A review conducted by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) found that the Medical Specialist Training Program was delivering on its targeted specialist training goals, including boosting specialist medical services in regional and rural Australia. A report from the National Health Performance Authority (NHPA) showed that general practice was the most efficient and most cost-effective part of the health system but, as the AMA had been telling the Government, greater investment was needed to allow general practice to continue providing high quality services to the community. On Close the Gap Day, Professor Owler said that coordinated action from all governments and the whole health sector was needed to really make a difference on long-term health outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The new AMA *Position Statement on Palliative Approach in Residential Aged Care Facilities* recommended that acute medical care settings should prioritise preserving and, where possible, extending life. The revised AMA *Position Statement on Restraint in the Care of People in Residential Aged Care Facilities* recognised the need for balance between a patient's right to self-determination and protection from harm, including harm to other residents and staff. The AMA released its *Guide to 10 Minimum Standards for Medical Forms* to help organisations design better forms for extracting medical information. Professor Owler addressed the BMA Symposium on the Australian perspective of the social determinants of health. Dr Parnis delivered a keynote address on physical activity at a Heart Foundation Policy Launch at Parliament House.



April



Professor Owler and Vice President Dr Stephen Parnis launching the AMA Public Hospital Report Card

The AMA released its Community Residency Program for Junior Medical Officers (JMOs), a plan to encourage more young doctors to choose a career in general practice. Professor Owler conducted a round of media interviews to support the Government’s ‘no jab, no pay’ vaccination policy. Warning of a ‘perfect storm’ in Australia’s public hospitals, the 2015 AMA Public Hospital Report Card was launched with a call on governments to restore funding, build capacity, and stop the blame game. The Report Card was covered extensively in the national media, and brought an almost instant response of a Government pledge to put hospital funding at the top of the COAG agenda. The AMA welcomed the Government’s announcement of a Review of

the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and the establishment of the Primary Health Care Advisory Group, but warned about both initiatives being solely about finding Budget savings. Professor Owler visited Gallipoli to officiate at a special ceremony to pay tribute to doctors and other health workers who cared for the injured and dying from all sides at the Gallipoli landing in 1915. The AMA joined with the Australian Academy of Science to launch *Climate Change challenges to health: Risks and opportunities*, a report outlining how to respond to the impacts of climate change on human health. The AMA backed the NPS Medicine Wise program, *Choosing Wisely*, to minimise waste in the health system. Dr Parnis led the AMA’s call on the Government to rule out cuts to public hospital tax concessions for public hospital staff.

May



Professor Owler with Leadership Development Dinner guest speaker, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard

The AMA and the Medical Board of Australia (MBA) signed a contract for the national delivery of health services to medical practitioners and medical students. The AMA welcomed the election of Senator Richard Di Natale – a general practitioner – as Leader of The Greens, noting his experience as a doctor would give him valuable insight on health policy. Professor Owler declared the 2015 Federal Budget a huge disappointment, with little on offer to make up for the massive cuts delivered to the health sector in the 2014 Budget. The only major initiative was the previously announced MBS Review. Professor Owler delivered a strong speech to the smaller private health funds, calling for greater transparency around private

health insurance products. The AMA strongly criticised the Federal Government’s decision to fund a new medical school at Curtin University in WA, citing a need for new training places, not new medical schools. Dr Parnis welcomed the After Hours Review Report, which recommended returning after hours funding



to the Practice Incentives Program (PIP). Dr Parnis raised the AMA's concerns that the Sixth Community Pharmacy Agreement was increasing funding to pharmacy at a time when the Medicare rebate freeze was cutting funding for medical services. The AMA joined with Palliative Care Australia in National Palliative Care Week to encourage broader community debate about death and dying, including end of life care. An Independent Expert Panel advised the Government to re-introduce a program to provide junior doctors with a rural general practice experience – a move supported and championed by the AMA. The AMA launched its *Pharmacist in General Practice Incentive Program* (PGPIP), a plan to make non-dispensing pharmacists a key part of the future general practice health care team. The AMA National Conference took place in Brisbane.

June



Professor Owler being interviewed for ABC Lateline

The AMA and the Law Council of Australia joined forces to raise awareness of the victims of domestic violence, and the important role played by medical practitioners in identifying and assisting victims. Professor Owler acknowledged the outstanding contribution of the many doctors – GPs, other specialists, researchers, and educators – who were awarded Queen's Birthday Honours. In Men's Health Week, the AMA urged Australian men to get serious about looking after their own health, with Dr Parnis telling the media that two-thirds of men over 18 were either overweight or obese. The AMA and AMSA reiterated their opposition to the new Curtin medical school, citing a COAG report confirming there were sufficient medical graduates under

existing arrangements. *The Lancet* report – *Health and Climate Change: policy responses to protect public health* – set out policy responses to the impacts of climate change on human health, consistent with the AMA Position Statement.

July



Professor Owler addresses the National Press Club

Professor Owler used 1 July to remind Australians that Medicare rebates had been frozen for three years, pushing up the costs of medical services and private health insurance premiums. He also welcomed the commencement of 31 new Primary Health Networks (PHNs) across the country, replacing the former Government's failed Medicare Locals. AMA Family Doctor Week kicked off with a renewed call for the Federal Government to support the PGPIP – a proposal that Deloitte Access Economics estimated would deliver \$1.56 in savings for every dollar invested in it. Professor Owler used his National Press Club



Address to acknowledge the outstanding contributions of grassroots GPs in successfully opposing the Government's bad policies, including the GP co-payment, the changes to level A and B rebates, and the \$5 cuts to Medicare rebates. He also defended the right of doctors and other healthcare workers working with refugees and asylum seekers to speak out about concerns for their patients' welfare, and called for a legislated exemption from prosecution. Responding to an options paper released by the COAG Health Council's Review of Medical Intern Training, the AMA warned against sweeping changes and instead called for the Review to follow the United Kingdom's lead and undertake a national survey of medical training. Professor Owler took to the airwaves to warn that an increase in the GST would not necessarily lead to more funding for public hospitals. He urged the Federal Government to live up to its responsibilities and provide proper funding to the States and Territories. The AMA made an extensive submission to the Expert Advisory Group (EAG) on Discrimination, Bullying and Harassment established by the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) to deal with concerns of unacceptable behaviour in the health sector. Professor Owler said the medical profession was leading the way in tackling problems that were prevalent across society as a whole.

August



Professor Owler with Senator Nova Peris during NT visit

The AMA welcomed the Primary Health Care Advisory Group's Discussion Paper, *Better Outcomes for People with Chronic and Complex Health Conditions through Primary Health Care*, but warned important reforms could not succeed without significant new investment in general practice and genuine Government support for GPs. Ahead of the return of Federal Parliament following the winter recess, the AMA called for a National Alcohol Strategy to tackle alcohol misuse. Professor Owler said the Federal Government had shown what was possible with the establishment of the National Ice Task Force, and similar decisive action was needed on alcohol. The AMA joined forces with the Australasian New Car Assessment Program

(ANCAP) on a new campaign urging politicians to make new technology - starting with Autonomous Emergency Braking - standard features in all new cars sold in Australia. The *Avoid the crash, Avoid the trauma* campaign was launched at Parliament House. The AMA kept up the pressure on Medibank Private over its aggressive contract negotiations with private hospitals, hosting a summit of more than 60 leaders from across all medical specialties to discuss the insurer's behaviour. There was intense media interest in the event, with Professor Owler appearing on the ABC's AM program and on talkback radio.



September



Professor Owler met with Professor Patrick McGorry to discuss mental health issues

Three updated AMA Position Statements were released – on *Methamphetamine, Combat Sport, and Climate Change and Human Health*. The AMA also released its submission to the Federal Government's *Primary Health Care Review*, warning against radical change for change's sake, and calling for the urgent lifting of the freeze on Medicare rebates. The RACS Expert Advisory Group adopted several AMA recommendations in its draft report on discrimination, bullying, and harassment, including the critical need to provide complainants with a safe place to come forward, free of the fear of retribution or stigma. The AMA congratulated Malcolm Turnbull on his election as Prime Minister on 15 September. But the goodwill was gone by 27 September when

Ms Ley launched a political attack on Medicare and the integrity of doctors. Laureate Professor Nicholas Talley was announced as the new Editor-in-Chief of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

October



Professor Owler addressed the Australasian Road Safety Conference

The AMA welcomed the Government's decision to return responsibility for aged care to the Health portfolio under Ms Ley, giving it the public and political focus it deserved. After months of pressure, the Government shelved its controversial university deregulation legislation. Professor Owler welcomed the decision but called on the Government to provide certainty for students that education would not be priced out of their reach after the next election. The AMA backed the stance taken by Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) doctors in raising concerns about the physical and mental health of children in immigration detention centres, and called on the Prime Minister to intervene. In separate submissions to the Department of Health, the

AMA called for a significant expansion of the Specialist Training Program (STP), and rejected a plan to link Practice Incentive Program (PIP) e-Health Incentive Payments to the adoption of the MyHealth Record by GPs. Another AMA Position Statement was released, on *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*. The AMA called on the Federal Government to hold the South Australian Government to account after the State reneged on a deal to commit to providing enough medical internships to meet the growing number of graduates from SA medical schools. Professor Owler wrote to Ms Ley urging her to make



medical training a priority agenda item at the November meeting of State and Territory Health Ministers. The Federal Government introduced legislation for changes to Medicare Safety Net arrangements. The AMA called for the changes to be voted down as they would wind back financial assistance to patients for out-of-hospital health care costs. The AMA lodged its submission in response to the MBS Review Taskforce Consultation Paper, recommending a fast review and rapid implementation of its findings.

November



Dr Parnis, Professor Tom Calma, and Professor Owler launching the AMA Indigenous Health Report Card

Applications opened for the 2016 AMA Indigenous Peoples' Medical Scholarship. A new Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) report confirmed that Australia's GPs were delivering efficient, high-quality primary care, putting the lie to the Government's regular criticisms of GPs in its efforts to sell its cost-cutting MBS review model. Professor Owler called on the Prime Minister to immediately rule out extending the GST to cover health, saying such a move would penalise the poorest and sickest in the community. New figures showed a 10 per cent growth in organ donations from deceased donors between January and September 2015. The AMA welcomed the rise but warned that the donor rate was still low

by international standards. Professor Owler urged people to seek advice from their GP and share their decision with their family. The AMA called on Immigration Minister Peter Dutton to show compassion and immediately fly a pregnant diabetic Kurdish woman to Australia for urgent medical care, instead of sending a neonatal specialist to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre. The COAG Health Council released the recommendations of its Medical Intern Review and adopted many of the AMA recommendations, including a National Training Survey. However, the AMA said it was yet to be convinced of the need for the Review's option of a pilot program in which the transition to practice is split between university in the first year and the workplace in the second. Professor Owler and Rural Health Minister Fiona Nash joined forces to launch the *AMA Indigenous Health Report Card 2015*, highlighting the devastating effects of imprisonment on the lifelong health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. With the school year coming to an end, the AMA warned Year 12 students to ensure their Schoolies Week celebrations were memorable for the right reasons, not visits to hospital emergency departments or embarrassing images being circulated via mobile phones. The AMA ended the month by joining with international medical associations to call on world leaders to make the health effects of climate change a priority in discussions at the United Nations Conference on Climate Change in Paris.



December



Dr Parnis on ABC News Breakfast discussing the Government's MBS Review

The Federal Government bowed to pressure from the AMA and the community and withdrew its proposed changes to the Medicare Safety Net. The AMA had raised its objections in a submission to the Senate Committee and in meetings with the Health Minister, the Opposition, and the Greens. The AMA wrote to Ms Ley offering solutions to address the shortfall in doctors in rural Australia, including lifting the targeted intake of medical students from a rural background from one-quarter to one-third of all new enrolments. The AMA released its new *Position Statement on Sexual Harassment in the Medical Workplace 2015* and its updated *Position Statement on Workplace Bullying and Harassment*, outlining the AMA's commitment to

working with the whole of the medical profession to stamp these problems out. It also released Position Statements on *International Medical Graduates*, *Primary Health Networks (PHNs)*, *the Medical Home*, *Tobacco Smoking and E-Cigarettes*, and *the Health Care of Asylum Seekers*. The Federal Treasurer released the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), with more cuts to health funding and cost-shifting to patients. Professor Owler said the axing of bulk billing incentives for pathology and diagnostic imaging services would increase the health cost burden for families. In its submission to the Government's Private Health Insurance (PHI) Review, the AMA called for greater transparency so people knew exactly what they were covered for under their policies. As the holiday season approached, the AMA urged all Australians to drive safely, to eat responsibly, to be careful in and around the water, to protect themselves from harmful UV exposure, and to use the time with their families to have the important but difficult conversations about end of life care. The AMA ended the year by encouraging smokers to make quitting the deadly habit their New Year resolution.

John Flannery/Maria Hawthorne