

Australian Medical Association Limited

ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499
 Website: <http://www.ama.com.au/>



Transcript: AMA President Professor Brian Owler, SKY News with Ashleigh Gillon, 15 May 2016

Subjects: Medicare rebate freeze, medical treatment of asylum seekers, Zika virus Rio Olympics #nomedicarefreeze

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Today the Australian Medical Association has launched its campaign against the Medicare patient rebate freeze after we saw it extended out to 2020 in the budget. Earlier I spoke with the AMA president Professor Brian Owler. I started by asking him if patients will actually notice the extension of this in terms of out of pocket costs.

BRIAN OWLER: Well, they will because what we've reached now is the tipping point. Many practices were absorbing the freeze that was there but the signal from the Government in the last budget, extending the freeze now out to 2020 means that practices just can't absorb almost seven years of a Medicare rebate freeze, and so we are now being contacted by many practices requesting assistance for them to transition over to a system where they are actually charging patients a fee. And once they do that, of course, they lose their bulk billing incentive. So it's likely the fee will be \$15, \$20 and in many cases above that. This is really bad news, particularly for patients with young children for instance, those with chronic illnesses, really the poor, the sick, the vulnerable in our community, because they're the ones who are going to bear the brunt of this policy.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: In terms of you launching this campaign this morning, you are campaigning against this Medicare freeze, in the middle of an election campaign, does that mean that the AMA is actually endorsing Labor in this election?

BRIAN OWLER: No, we're not endorsing anyone. In fact, what we want to see from the Opposition is their policy around the freeze. Now I've been campaigning and lobbying both sides of politics about this issue, right from the 2014 budget, but of course, GPs are the ones that are angry, they're the ones that are asking the AMA, the colleges and other health groups to provide them with information. It's not too late for the Coalition to actually look at this policy and to come to a much better arrangement that actually does put investment into general practice and we'll be holding the Opposition to account in exactly the same way, and through this election campaign we'll be asking both sides of politics about their health policies. Last time around health was almost a taboo topic and what we had was surprise after surprise. We don't want that again. What we want to know from both sides of politics is what their health policies are, how they're going to keep this country healthy, and how they're going to maintain Australia's very good healthcare system.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Well, Malcolm Turnbull's actually focusing on health policy today. He's made a \$54 million announcement that his Government is going to give thousands of families of children with type one diabetes continuous glucose monitoring devices. Is that a good policy in your view?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, it is, and that's something to be welcomed. There's no doubt about the fact that it's very difficult for patients with type one diabetes, but a bigger problem in Western Sydney at the moment is type two diabetes and we haven't really seen the policies around prevention, because that's a preventable disease, that need to be there to actually try and prevent people from getting type two diabetes in the first place. So of course we welcome that

announcement, but at the end of the day when you make an announcement of \$54 million and on the other hand you're taking \$925 million out with a Medicare rebate freeze, the two things don't add up. You've got to make sure that we're actually investing in health for all of Australians, not just picking on the things that might give them a good story for one day in the papers.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: On another issue, Professor, we have seen a woman and her newborn baby transferred from Nauru to Australia for medical treatment. How do you rate the medical facilities at Nauru?

BRIAN OWLER: Well it is something of concern. The AMA has spoken about asylum seeker policy from the health perspective, and one of the things that this Government did was to actually take away the independent oversight that was there. We had people that could see what health policies were being instituted, see the facilities in the detention centres and actually speak openly about these issues. We need to get back to that level of transparency and I've called on both sides of politics to reinstitute an independent panel of doctors that can report on these matters in an open and transparent way. It's only by doing that that we're actually going to avoid these sorts of incidents happening in the future and make sure that we live up to our responsibilities to at least provide adequate levels of health care to those people that are under our care.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: And just finally on another matter, last week there were calls from a Harvard report for the Rio Olympics to be cancelled because of the Zika virus. From a public health perspective would that be the best course of action in your view?

BRIAN OWLER: No, I don't think that's the best course of action, but it is somewhat a cause for concern. Now I think there has to be very clear advice for people that are travelling to Rio, in fact I was at the World Medical Association meeting in Buenos Aires recently where this topic was discussed, including by countries in South America where Zika virus is prevalent. We need to make sure, particularly, women that are of child bearing age are educated about this issue, and also the male partners, because there is a rate of sexual transmission as well, and that might occur when they return home. So those sorts of things need to be discussed. We need to basically educate people and make sure they're aware of these issues before they travel to Rio.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: So do you think Australian athletes who perhaps are thinking about falling pregnant in the near future, they should seriously be reconsidering their attendance there?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, I think, clearly if they're an athlete at the Olympics, pregnancy is probably something that they would like to delay anyway. It's not a good idea to be looking at falling pregnant at the same time as travelling to these areas where the virus is endemic. So I think that sort of planning and education needs to be there so that we don't have people being put at risk when they travel to the Rio games.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Professor Brian Owler from the Australian Medical Association, we appreciate your time. Thank you.

BRIAN OWLER: It's a pleasure

15 May 2016

CONTACT: John Flannery
Kirsty Waterford

02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
02 6270 5464 / 0427 209 753