

8 January 2015

The Hon Tony Abbott MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

I write to highlight the iniquitous impact of the changes which you announced in December with respect to timed general practice consultations and to ask that you urgently make a new regulation to repeal the *Health Insurance (General Medical Services Table) Amendment (Duration of Attendances) Regulation 2014* (the regulation) before it commences on 19 January 2015, or take any necessary steps to the same effect.

The regulation requires general practitioner Level B consultations to now be of at least 10 minutes in duration. Patients' Medicare rebates for more than 20 million (23%) consultations have been cut by \$20.10, stripping more than \$500 million out of general practice per annum.

Your Government has imposed this significantly detrimental measure on general practice without consultation, with only five weeks' notice and during a period when they are operating with minimum staff. You have left it to general practitioners to explain your "savings" measure to the Australian people. This is hardly congruent with a Government that is "totally committed to rebuilding general practice" and that is "cutting red tape".

Contrary to your Government's rhetoric, commodifying general practitioner services into 10 minute units of time is not conducive to quality care. Quality health care is a function of the care delivered by the general practitioner for the specific circumstances and needs of each patient. These are as variable as patients themselves. As with all aspects of medicine, the general practitioner's service must deal with the complexity of the patient's condition. The length of the service depends on the skill and experience of the medical practitioner and the medical practitioner's knowledge of the patient.

The level of anger and disbelief within the general practitioner community that your Government has so little regard for the value of their services at the front line of Australian healthcare is unprecedented.

In health policy terms the measure is short-sighted. As the backbone of Australian health care, general practice is proven to be cost-effective in preventing, managing and delaying the development of health conditions and the associated downstream health costs.

Primary healthcare is provided primarily by practitioners who practice in a small business setting. These practices will not be able to absorb the cuts your Government has made to the Medicare rebate. Costs will be passed on to patients. Some will be able to make these payments but many will not. These costs may deter many patients from seeking early treatment.

The effect of the regulation will be compounded in mid 2015 when the \$5 rebate cut for general patients is introduced, and thereafter with the indexation freeze on Medicare Schedule fees.

The AMA wants to work with your Government to find realistic and sensible long term approaches to primary care. The proposed changes are not the solution. Worse, the proposed changes threaten the very viability of general practice.

I ask that you make the time for an early meeting to discuss these concerns.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Owler', written in a cursive style.

A/Prof Brian Owler
President