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1. Introduction

**MedicarePlus: Protecting and Strengthening Medicare**

On 18 November 2003, the Australian Government launched MedicarePlus, a $2.4 billion programme to strengthen Medicare now and for future generations.

MedicarePlus provides more opportunities for Australians to be bulk billed and more convenience for patients to claim their rebate without having to line up in a Medicare office. Subject to legislation it will introduce a comprehensive Government-funded Safety Net to cover all Australians against high out-of-pocket medical costs outside the hospital system.

MedicarePlus also substantially increases the supply of doctors and nurses and provides more doctors for people in aged care.

**MedicarePlus for Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme**

One of the initiatives included in the MedicarePlus package is the MedicarePlus for Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme. The MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme provides access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate for services provided by pre 1996 non-vocationally registered medical practitioners, also known as OMPs, who provide services in an area of workforce shortage.

The intent of the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme is to provide an extra incentive for certain OMPs who are currently in adequately supplied workforce areas to relocate to areas of workforce shortage for a period of time.

The Programme commenced on 1 February 2004 and enables pre 1996 OMPs who provide services in an eligible area of workforce shortage to apply for immediate access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate.

After these medical practitioners have provided services in an area of workforce shortage for five years, their services will continue to attract the higher rebate regardless of where they are subsequently located.

Pre 1996 non-vocationally registered medical practitioners who are already working in a designated area of workforce shortage under a current eligible programme may be able to have this time count towards their five years.

This Programme is administered by Medicare Australia on behalf of the Department of Health, in accordance with these Guidelines and the Programme Business Rules.

2. Eligibility Requirements

To be eligible for this Programme a doctor:

- must be a non-vocationally registered medical practitioner registered with a State or Territory Medical Registration Board before 1 November 1996;
- must be accessing Medicare rebates in general medical services prior to 1 November 1996;
- must be providing medical services in a defined area of workforce shortage; and
- must not have previously been on the Vocational Register or the Fellows List.

Salaried doctors providing general medical services outside hospitals, who are eligible to obtain a provider number and attract Medicare benefits for their services, and who relocate or provide ongoing services in an area of workforce shortage, may also be eligible for the Programme if they meet the above criteria.
It is important to note that you are not eligible for this Programme if you are a medical practitioner, and because the application of section 19AA of the *Health Insurance Act 1973*, Medicare benefits are not payable for your professional services.

Any eligible medical practitioner wanting to move to an area of workforce shortage to provide general practice services at the higher A1 Medicare rebate should contact Medicare Australia to confirm eligible locations (for contact details see page 13).

3. Areas of Workforce Shortage

**Defining Areas of Workforce Shortage**

For the purpose of this Programme, areas of workforce shortage have been determined nationwide using a population to 'full-time equivalent (FTE)' general practitioner ratio.

The latest published Estimated Resident Population (ABS Catalogue No. 3218.0) is used at the Statistical Local Area (SLA) level. If the SLA is too small to provide useable data, the area will be aggregated to a larger statistical region to better reflect the catchment of the area.

Areas with a population ratio of more than the national average (approximately 1385) per full-time equivalent GP may be eligible for the Programme. Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) are used to define areas because SLAs are the smallest geographic unit for which annual population figures are available. The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes annual population figures for SLAs on an Estimated Resident Population basis (ERP) as at 30 June of each year.

Indigenous Health Training posts (formerly Aboriginal Medical Service posts) will be considered an area of workforce shortage under this Programme.

**Reviewing Areas of Workforce Shortage**

The defined areas of workforce shortage will be updated annually to include changes in Programme eligibility.

If a locality that has been eligible under the Programme is no longer classified as an area of workforce shortage due to an increase in the number of doctors compared to the population, that locality will no longer be available to new Programme applicants wanting to relocate to this locality.

Current Programme participants providing medical services in this locality will remain eligible, and will be able to have their service in this locality counted towards their five years in an area of workforce shortage.

The status of defined non-eligible localities will be reviewed quarterly by the Department of Health. If a locality that was not previously eligible for this Programme has registered a change in its doctor to population ratio, which now classifies it as an area of workforce shortage, eligible medical practitioners in this locality will be able to apply for this Programme.

**Areas of Workforce Shortage Database**

The Department of Health will provide Medicare Australia with a database containing all current areas of workforce shortage. This database will be updated quarterly. To determine eligibility for the Programme, medical practitioners will need to provide both their suburb and postcode details to Medicare Australia for assessment.
4. Continuing Professional Development Requirements

Requirements for Continuing Professional Development

To maintain eligibility for the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme, and therefore access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate, medical practitioners will be required to register and then undertake continuing professional development activities within three months of commencing on the Programme.

The aim of requiring general practitioners to undertake continuing professional development activities is to assist Australian general practitioners to maintain and improve the quality of care they give to patients and to promote the highest possible standards of care to the community.

Both the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) provide recognised continuing professional development programmes. Please contact the individual Colleges for further information regarding their programmes (contact details on page 13).

Reporting on Continuing Professional Development Requirements

It is the responsibility of individual practitioners to ensure they are meeting their continuing professional development requirements.

Annually, the RACGP will provide Medicare Australia with the names of medical practitioners who have not met their continuing professional development requirements.

Medical practitioners who have not met these requirements will have their access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate removed.

Participants of this Programme who fail to meet their continuing professional development requirements will receive a letter from Medicare Australia advising that their access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate will cease in 28 days from the date stated on the letter.

The medical practitioner will then need to contact the RACGP to arrange to meet their continuing professional development requirements.

The RACGP then has to provide Medicare Australia with evidence that the medical practitioner has since met their continuing professional development requirements, and therefore remains eligible for the Programme. If the RACGP does not contact Medicare Australia within the 28 days with evidence that the medical practitioner is now meeting the Programme requirements, access to the higher rebate will cease.
5. Completion of Five Years Service

Five Years in an Area of Workforce Shortage

Under this Programme, the services of a medical practitioner who has practised in an area of workforce shortage for at least five years, will continue to attract the higher A1 Medicare rebate regardless of where they practice in the future, provided continuing professional development requirements are met.

Once an eligible medical practitioner begins to provide medical services in an area of workforce shortage through this Programme, this service will begin to count towards the five years required to attain unrestricted access to the higher Medicare rebate.

Level of Service Required

Medical practitioners will need to complete 20 active quarters of service in an area of workforce shortage before they can apply for unrestricted access to the higher Medicare rebate. There is no requirement for these quarters to be completed consecutively, however they must be completed within the life of the Programme.

Defining an Active Quarter

For the purposes of this Programme an active quarter is a defined quarter of the year where Medicare billing equals at least $10,000.

Existing Programmes Counting Towards Five Years Service

Medical practitioners who have provided services in a designated area of workforce shortage through either the Rural Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme or the Outer Metropolitan Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme may be able to count active time in these programmes towards their five years service.

Assessment of length of service provided through these programmes will be based on length of active time in the programme.

However, once these medical practitioners join the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme, future assessment of length of service will be based on active quarters, as described above.

From 1 February 2004, time accrued through either the Rural OMPs or Outer Metropolitan OMPs Programmes will not count towards active service for the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme.
6. Delegate’s Discretion

The Department of Health delegate has full discretion to make decisions on all matters in relation to the administration of the Programme, including but not limited to eligible locations and requirements for medical practitioners under the Programme.

7. Related Programmes

Rural Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme

The intent of the Rural OMPs Programme is to recognise the value of services provided by doctors in rural areas and to provide substantial financial benefits for their patients. The Rural OMPs Programme provides access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate to all general practice services provided by non-vocationally recognised medical practitioners in Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) Classifications 4-7.

Under the Rural OMPs Programme, these medical practitioners are required to express an interest in undertaking training to achieve Fellowship of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (FRACGP).

Outer Metropolitan Other Medical Practitioners (OMPs) Programme

The Outer Metropolitan OMPs Programme aims to improve access to medical practitioner services in outer metropolitan areas of the six State capital cities and the ACT. The Programme has two components. The first is aimed at encouraging non-vocationally recognised general practitioners to move to outer metropolitan areas with doctor shortages.

The second component encourages non-vocationally recognised general practitioners already working in these under-supplied outer metropolitan areas to remain there. The programme provides access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate for approved doctors who agree to undertake a pathway to FRACGP.

If vocational recognition has not been achieved by 30 November 2006, the programme end date, access to A1 Medicare rebates will cease, and doctors will only be eligible to access A2 Medicare rebates.

8. Application Process

Application Form

Application forms for the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme will be available through Medicare Australia or the Department of Health websites, and mailed out on request (for contact details see page 13). Applicants should return completed application forms to Medicare Australia.

It is the responsibility of individual doctors to ensure they are registered on the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme before billing at the higher rate. Medicare Australia will send a letter to all applicants informing the outcome of their application.
Application Process – Medical Practitioners Located in an Area of Workforce Shortage

Medical practitioners currently providing services in a defined area of workforce shortage (contact Medicare Australia for eligible areas) should complete the Application form and return it to Medicare Australia.

Medicare Australia will process applications within 21 days of receipt of completed Application forms. Medicare Australia will advise successful applicants of the commencement date of payment of the higher Medicare rebate in the letter advising approval for the Programme. Payment of the higher rebate will not be backdated.

Application Process – Moving to an Area of Workforce Shortage

Medical practitioners not providing services in a defined area of workforce shortage can apply to join the Programme by nominating on the Application form a defined area of workforce shortage at which they will practice. Medical practitioners should ensure they have approval in writing from Medicare Australia before commencing practice.

The Department of Health and Medicare Australia will take no responsibility for medical practitioners who commence practice or commence billing at the higher rebate in an ineligible locality prior to receiving advice from Medicare Australia regarding their application to join the Programme.

Once the application has been approved, the medical practitioner can apply for a new provider number at the new practice address. A copy of the approval letter should accompany the Provider Number Application Form to ensure the application is given priority.

The Provider Number Application Form should be sent to the Medicare Australia Provider Liaison section in the State or Territory in which the practice is located (see Provider Number Application Form for details).

Medicare Australia will provide written notification of the new Medicare Provider Number and an effective date for accessing the higher Medicare rebate within 14 days of receiving the Provider Number Application Form. Payment of the higher rebate will not be backdated. It is important to note that approval to relocate to the area nominated on the Application form is only valid for 3 months from the date approval is given from Medicare Australia.

Practice Locations

Applicants will be required to provide details of each practice address they propose to provide services at through this Programme.

Medicare Australia will determine eligibility of individual practice addresses as part of the assessment process of the application for the Programme.

Change of Details

Programme participants will be required to complete a Change of Details/Additional or Replacement Practice form each time there is any change to their details, they want to register an additional practice location, or they have moved to another area and would like to continue in the Programme.

It is the responsibility of Programme participants to inform Medicare Australia whether a practice is an additional practice location or a replacement practice location.

Programme participants will also be required to notify Medicare Australia within 14 days if they move out of an area of workforce shortage, or are otherwise no longer eligible for the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme.
9. Assessment and Verification of Applications

Assessment of Programme Applications
Medicare Australia is responsible for assessing applicants for the Programme, including provider eligibility, eligibility of the practice location(s) and recognition of prior service in an area of workforce shortage through an existing programme.

Once an application has been approved, Programme participants will have access to the higher Medicare rebate and will be able to claim the appropriate higher item numbers listed in the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

It is the responsibility of individual doctors to ensure that they are registered on the MedicarePlus for OMPs Programme before billing at the higher rate. Medicare Australia will send a letter to all applicants informing the outcome of their application.

Medicare Australia will advise successful applicants of the commencement date for payment of the higher Medicare rebate in the letter advising approval for the Programme for applicants already located in an area of workforce shortage.

For applicants who have been approved by Medicare Australia to move to an area of workforce shortage, the commencement date for payment of the higher Medicare rebate will be advised by Medicare Australia when written notification of the new Medicare Provider Number for the new practice location is provided.

Verification of Completion of Five Years Service
Medicare Australia will be responsible for verifying the completion of five years service by participants on the Programme. For the purposes of this Programme, five years service is the equivalent of 20 active quarters claiming over $10,000 Medicare billing, and/or recognised prior service through either the Rural OMPs Programme or the Outer Metropolitan OMPs Programme.

Once five years service has been assessed and confirmed, Medicare Australia will advise the medical practitioner that they are eligible for continuing access to the higher A1 rebate regardless of where they practice in the future.

Annually, Medicare Australia will advise Programme participants of the number of active quarters they completed in the calendar year.

10. Access to the Higher A1 Medicare Rebate and Provider Numbers

Medicare Australia will use the provider number entered on each claim to determine the level of Medicare rebate applicable.

For the purpose of this Programme, in order to receive the higher A1 Medicare rebate, the provider number that is entered on a claim must be linked to a practice location that is in an area of workforce shortage.

Medical practitioners cannot use a provider number that provides access to the higher A1 Medicare rebate if it is linked to a practice location that is in an area of workforce shortage for any services provided outside of its specific practice location.

11. Monitoring & Evaluation

The Australian Government reserves the right to review medical practitioners’ documentation relating to the Programme to ensure compliance with Programme requirements.
12. DVA LMO Scheme

Medical practitioners participating in the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Local Medical Officer Scheme are able to apply for this Programme, provided they meet the Programme eligibility requirements outlined in these Guidelines.

13. Programme Contact Details

**Department of Health**
To obtain further information regarding the programme, contact:

OMPs@health.gov.au

**Department of Human Services - Medicare**
To obtain application forms, payment information and advice, or to determine areas of workforce shortage eligibility, contact the Department of Human Services – Medicare by emailing: PROVIDER.REGISTRATION@humanservices.gov.au

For further information regarding continuing professional development contact:

**The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners**
RACGP College House
1 Palmerston Crescent
SOUTH MELBOURNE VIC 3205
Ph: 1800 472 247

[The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners](www.racgp.org.au)

OR

**The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine**
ACRRM
PO Box 167
KELVIN GROVE DC QLD 4059
Ph: 1800 223 226

[Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine](www.acrrm.org.au)