



THE HON SUSSAN LEY MP

Minister for Health
Minister for Sport

TRANSCRIPT

Press Conference – Medicare Rebates 15 January 2015

Compere: Okay taking you live now to the Health Minister Sussan Ley in Melbourne.

Sussan Ley: Significant concerns and unintended consequences of changes in Medicare rebates scheduled to begin on Monday 19 January. I am deeply concerned by the misinformation that is causing confusion for patients and confusion for doctors. As a result, I'm announcing today that the changes to level A and B Medicare consultation items will not commence on Monday as planned. The Government is taking them off the table. However, it remains critical that we implement changes to ensure quality care for Australians and a secure future for Medicare.

I'm announcing today my strong commitment to undertake wide ranging consultation on the ground with doctors and the community across the country in order to come up with sensible options to deliver appropriate Medicare reform. I want to make it clear that in my consultations I will be guided by these four principles - protecting Medicare for the long-term, ensuring bulk billing remains for vulnerable and concessional patients, maintaining our high quality care and treatment for all Australians, a price signal of a modest co-payment into the health system for those who have the capacity to pay.

I also remain committed to addressing key challenges such as 'six minute medicine' which has been raised by others, including the Australian Medical Association and Labor themselves in the past and I will continue to consult on how to do just that. I've spoken to key medical groups this morning to inform them of the Government's decision and my commitment to continuing to consult with them. In the last decade spending on Medicare has more than doubled from \$8 billion in 2004 to \$20 billion today, yet we raise only \$10 billion from the Medicare levy. Spending is projected to climb to \$34 billion in the next decade to 2024.

So my clear message to all with an interest in Medicare reform is that doing nothing is not an option. This is the time for everyone to work constructively together to secure a more sustainable Medicare system. Thank you and I'm happy to take your questions.

Question: Is this just the Government postponing that cut of the rebate for short-term visits?

Sussan Ley: No, the changes to level A and B scheduled to begin on Monday are off the table.

Question: What was the primary factor in influencing the Government's decision to take it off the table?

Sussan Ley: Look, since being sworn in as minister I've had a lot of contact with doctors, with patients, with the community generally and with my colleagues who having gone home to their various electorates for the summer break have talked to the various medical practices that they represent and reflected that concern back to me. So we do want to tackle issues such as six minute medicine but we are not going to proceed with these changes and I am going to talk directly to doctors, to the sector across the country to make sure that we work together to ensure the sustainability of the system.

Question: What kind of negotiations were there in terms of finding an alternative to cutting the rebate for short-term visits?

Sussan Ley: This isn't a matter for negotiations; this is a matter for pausing and consulting, so I don't know where that consultation process is going to end. If I did it would be a bit of a sham consultation. What I really want to do is visit doctors where they practice, where they live and work, talk to them, talk to their community members and I've heard from many. People often think you send the Health Minister an e-mail she never reads it. In fact I've read an awful lot over the last fortnight and as I said, I've heard, I've listened and I'm deciding to take this action now.

Question: How much of this is a result of pressure from the Senate, this change?

Sussan Ley: Look, I think it's fair to say that as a government we're pressured by the Senate on an ongoing basis. I intend to speak to the cross-bench senators about their views on health policy. I need to explain to them and I know many of them already understand that our Medicare system is growing at a rapid and unsustainable rate and together we need to work to implement policies that bring it back into a sustainable situation and protect it for the long-term. So I look forward also to having those conversations with cross-bench senators.

Question: Bruce Billson said this morning that the Government would persevere, is this another surprise from the Government supposedly no surprises?

Sussan Ley: Look, we are certainly going to persevere with our intentions to protect Medicare, to introduce the relevant price signals and this was also about introducing a price signal, in terms of a modest co-payment and making sure that we work with doctors and practices in order to do that. So yeah, I'm happy to be characterised as persistent and persevering.

Question: Bruce Billson said one thing this morning, now you've announced something completely different this afternoon. Is that what Australians can come to expect from this Government?

Sussan Ley: Well what Australians can expect from us is that we will listen to their concerns, we will talk to them and we will respond and that's exactly what this announcement is about.

Question: You refer to confusion being a part of the reason that you've needed to shelve these changes, how do you explain that confusion? Is it confusion or just bad policy?

Sussan Ley: Look, I think genuinely there's been some misunderstanding and when new measures are announced, misunderstanding often does follow. But it is important that doctors and their patients know that the changes that were talked about to come into effect on Monday will not. And you know, the associated alarm over no more bulk billing or an additional \$20 fee that patients may have to pay, all of that that is added I think to a state of confusion, not all of it, by the way, in line with the previous policy, we need to put that to one side and I don't want to talk about what the previous policy meant because as I said, it's off the table and I stand ready to engage, to consult, and to talk to the sector.

Question: Would it have been better to gauge the views of the Senate on this policy before you moved to implement it and then you possibly wouldn't have this back-down today?

Sussan Ley: Look all views are important and I will continue to engage with cross-bench senators, with my own backbench colleagues who really do reflect the real world in the areas in which they live across the country and to doctors, to practices and to those who use the health system a lot and have a great interest in it.

Question: If it were just about confusion though, wouldn't the Government press ahead in trying to explain and clarify what the changes are and how they will have an impact on people rather than shocking them?

Sussan Ley: Look, these changes are no longer going to happen. That doesn't mean we aren't going to work together with doctors and with the sector to continue to protect Medicare, to introduce a price signal in health and to ensure that we have the high quality treatment and health system in Australia that we are all so proud of. So my message today is to pause, to consult, to listen and then to take the next steps.

Question: How long do you think it will be before we hear your next policy?

Sussan Ley: Well I know I'm going to be very busy because the consultation I just talked about starts today and it will involve me talking to doctors, to practices, to people across the country. So as I said, I've had a lot of those communications already. I look forward to responding personally, I look forward to visiting doctors in their own parts of the world and I look forward to talking to them and finding out what matters. So we can do this well and we will.

Question: At this very point in time is there another plan? Bruce Billson said this morning that there's no alternative policies that have been put on the table apart from this one that you've just backed down on?

Sussan Ley: Well, if I knew of another plan why would I be announcing a consultation? I mean the consultation is real, the consultation is important and, you know, I want to hear from those who are at the front line and I absolutely intend to do that by visiting, listening and talking.

Question: Isn't it a bit too late? Shouldn't that listening and consultation with the public should have occurred before you went ahead to move this policy?

Sussan Ley: Well I don't want to comment on what went before. I was a minister in another portfolio. I've been sworn in as the Health Minister, this is the approach that I'm taking.

Question: Have you inherited a bit of a mess from your predecessor, Peter Dutton?

Sussan Ley: I've been sworn in as Health Minister, this is the approach I'm going to be taking and I stand by and stand up for every single one of my colleagues in the Ministry and throughout the Parliament and we're working hard and we're going to continue to work hard to deliver a health system that protects all of Australians.

Question: How much did you personally have to do with this policy? You were only sworn into the job, given the job in late December.

Sussan Ley: I didn't catch the beginning of your question.

Question: How much personally do you have to do with this policy given you were only given this job in late December?

Sussan Ley: Look what I would say is we're a team. I'm announcing a decision that has been made. We are a team but this is very much my stamp, I believe, on the portfolio, that of consulting, engaging and listening and I thank you very much.

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