

Shake-up for bill shock

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The announcement of an expert committee to consider the issue of out-of-pocket medical costs presents a great opportunity to tackle a blight on the health system, the Consumers Health Forum says.

“The “bill shock” of high direct costs is a painful reality for too many patients who have undergone private medical treatment,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

“As the Health Minister, Greg Hunt, says large out-of-pocket fees are a matter of justifiable and considerable community concern and can cause financial hardship. The committee, to be chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Brendan Murphy, will investigate options to ensure consumers are better informed of fees before agreeing to treatment.

“CHF will be represented on the committee which is made up largely of representatives from medical and specialist organisations.

“The CHF has for some time been calling for the public listing of individual medical fees on an authoritative web site so that consumers can quickly ascertain what fees they might face and compare them if possible with those of other specialists.

“The Senate Committee into health insurance and out-of-pocket costs has recently also called for fees to be published on a searchable database which would also include details about the specialist’s experience and complication and error rates to enable consumers to weigh the relative skill of a given surgeon or doctor.

“We are pleased to see that the Minister has proposed that the committee will explore strategies to ensure that consumers and referring general

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practitioners can compare fees and out-of-pocket costs when choosing a doctor.

“In an encouraging gesture, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons told the Senate committee that it would accept public disclosure of surgeons’ fees and that it would be a relatively simple task to publish fees in order to enable consumers to better understand their out-of-pocket costs and make an informed decision.

“What has become clear in recent surveys of specialists’ and surgeons’ fees is the huge variation, sometimes by many thousands of dollars, in what practitioners in different cities charge for the same procedure. We would hope that publication of fees, particularly alongside performance data, would deliver a more reasonable, consumer-friendly system.

“That step towards greater transparency has the potential to make specialists, private insurance and the health sector generally, more responsive to community needs,” Ms Wells said.

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