

Specialist fees website aimed to end bill shock

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Health consumers already paying out thousands of dollars a year in premiums may at last be able to check out what further out of pocket costs they face going to private specialists with the announcement of plans for an official website disclosing fee levels.

"We support this first important step to bring private medical charging practices into line with contemporary business practices," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells said today, commenting on the release of the report and recommendations of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Out of Pocket Costs.

"Out of pocket costs and the resulting 'bill shock' incurred by many patients when they get hit with charges running into thousands of dollars for standard treatments has been a concern raised repeatedly with the Consumers Health Forum in recent years.

"The wrenching experiences faced by so many privately insured consumers including cancer patients and others requiring life-saving treatment was highlighted in last year's out of pocket costs survey report by the Consumers Health Forum which has been cited in the ministerial advisory committee report.

"The report says there are a minority of specialists charging egregious fees but also makes the point that many people also struggle to deal with the cumulative impact of numerous modest fees.

"We need more transparency and price disclosure as a means at least of bringing high fees to the notice of consumers, enabling them to compare and contrast fees where possible. We have previously called for an authoritative website disclosing individual specialist fees for some years and it is good to see the committee has also recommended this measure.

"The challenge now will be to ensure that once it is introduced after consultation with consumers and doctors that all specialists use it. We need ways to ensure participation and we expect doctors to cooperate and their professional associations and colleges to lead in the public interest.

"Consumers also need to see individual performance statistics of specialists. As the committee report says, higher fees do not necessarily mean higher quality care. Developments in information technology and health data collection are now making it more feasible to show specialists' outcome performance. "We welcome the Government's

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commitment to ensure more consumer education about out of pocket costs. It is especially important given most people find the private health costs system a maze," Ms Wells said.

ENDS

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