

Medical fees probe needed to ensure universal access

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The Consumers Health Forum welcomes the report that the Chief Medical Officer is to investigate excessive medical fees as an important step to promote access to necessary health care for all Australians.

“As our *Out of Pocket Pain* survey last year found, many Australians with or without insurance are facing crippling out of pocket medical costs for life-changing care that they either cannot afford or that causes them financial misery,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

“We acknowledge that this is a complex issue and its solution will require wide-ranging, well-considered decisions.

“In many cases it is not only high surgeon bills that create financial agony for consumers but also the accumulation of a myriad other bills, such as those of the anaesthetist, the assistant surgeon and scans.

“Without a more comprehensive approach we risk the universality of Medicare leaving those on low and modest incomes waiting or going without the care they need. The declining effectiveness of private health insurance is an additional challenge.

“All health institutions have a role to play in solving this issue. The community expects vigilance by the professional colleges around ethics and standards, by the medical boards in regulation and the government in setting effective policy.

“There is also a need for the public to be educated that higher fees do not necessarily mean a better outcome or higher quality care.

“We have a universal Medicare system and all those in need of life-saving or life-changing surgery should be able to access it at a reasonable price.

“The out of pocket costs issue is not going to go away without more comprehensive measures.

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“The Federal Government has gone some way to introduce more incentives for transparency of medical fees through the proposed website listing, and through changes to health insurance policies to make them simpler and more comparable.

“We seek urgent consideration of a mix of solutions such as more adequate safety nets, incentives for specialists to bulk-bill, and a national standard for informed financial consent,” Ms Wells said.

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