

Medical Costs Finder a disappointing first step

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The Medical Costs Finder website launched today is a disappointing first step towards the greater fees transparency so sadly lacking in Australia's private medical arrangements, the Consumers Health Forum says.

"But it is a start and we hope just the first step towards a system in which all doctors' fees are published," the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

"The Medical Costs Finder website is an inadequate response to the need for an open and comprehensive presentation of individual doctor's fees and likely out of pocket costs.

"The Federal Government is promising more detailed information later and we will continue to press for more specific details to guide patients in their choices.

"The new Costs Finder provides a range of three levels of expected out of pocket costs ---- "low", "typical/median" or "high" --- for listed medical procedures in their city or region. It also details the typical benefits and Medicare reimbursements for each procedure.

"The guide is by no means exact but will at least enable privately insured patients to check their own doctor's likely out of pocket costs against the likely range of out of pocket costs for their area, giving them a basis for querying excessive fees.

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Consumers shaping health

“There is an urgent need for the website to display more detailed information giving individual doctors’ fees. We urge doctors to participate by permitting their fees to be displayed on the website.

“The failure of the organised medical profession to take a more proactive approach on the publication of fees does doctors no credit.

“The Government, through Medicare data, already has access to much of this information. The question now needs to be asked: do the interests of doctors in preserving their fee confidentiality outweigh the interests of patients in being able to ascertain and compare doctors’ fees?

“The bill shock of high out of pocket medical costs is a central factor in the malaise afflicting health insurance. Insurance membership is declining because of consumers’ uncertainty about the value of private cover and the potential for high out of pocket which private patients face.

“When we consider the thousands of dollars Australians pay every year for health insurance, it is unacceptable that consumers are not able easily to check the fees of specialists so they are able to make informed decisions.

“We are also urging the Government and the medical profession to introduce a national standard for informed financial consent requiring patients to be given a single quote covering all components of care, including procedure and diagnostic costs, before operations.

“Much work has already been done on this development by Cancer Australia and other organisations, with the support of the Consumers Health Forum.

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“It’s time for the medical profession to follow common business practice in presenting consumers with a clear quote of all the costs they face for a given procedure,” Ms Wells said.

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