

Position Statement on Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) optometry rebate

Our Position

Vision 2020 Australia has concerns for Australia's eye health and vision care resulting from the recent changes to the Medicare Benefits Schedule reducing the patient rebate for optometric consultations which came into effect on 1 January 2015, and the freeze on indexation of this rebate until July 2018. This change poses a threat to service provision and patient access to eye health and vision care, as well as a threat to access for low income patients for whom optometrists are unable to viably maintain bulk billing. Vision 2020 Australia's concern relates to the disproportionate impact borne by those patients at disadvantage - essentially, for patients to whom an out-of-pocket expense is a barrier to accessing health services, this may mean reduced access to optometric care.

Vision 2020 Australia recommends that the Australian Government apply the same patient exemptions regarding the Medicare rebate reduction to optometric services as was proposed for general practice services, thereby ensuring equitable access and consistency across Medicare. Exempt patient groups include children aged less than 16 years, pensioners, concession card holders and those in residential aged care facilities. These patient exemptions should be extended to optometry services to ensure all patients are afforded equitable opportunity to access optometric care. By the same token, it will also help optometrists to continue to bulk bill their most vulnerable patients (where considered appropriate) and ensure the ongoing provision of their services.

Policy Context

As part of the 2014-15 Federal Budget the Australian Government committed to reducing the Medicare Benefits Schedule rebate for all optometry services from 85 per cent to 80 per cent commencing from 1 January 2015. This measure was anticipated to also remove the charging cap that applied to optometrists accessing the Medicare Benefits Schedule, enabling them in the future to set their own fees in a similar manner to other health providers. These changes came into full effect from 1 January 2015, prompting a response from the eye health and vision care sector regarding the impact on service provision.

According to Optometry Australia, optometrists working in areas where patients are reliant upon bulk billing to access care may have little choice but to absorb the cut to their income from the rebate reduction; estimated to begin at \$9,168.00 per full-time equivalent optometrist in 2015. Such a cut to Medicare-funded optometry services puts in jeopardy the ongoing provision of services in these low socio-economic areas, including outreach services provided in some remote areas such as the Visiting Optometrists Scheme (VOS). It should be noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over represented in the population groups identified above for exemption.

About Vision 2020 Australia

Established in October 2000, Vision 2020 Australia is part of VISION 2020: The Right to Sight, a global initiative of the World Health Organisation and the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. Vision 2020 Australia is the peak body for the eye health and vision care sector, representing over 50 member organisations involved in: local and global eye care; health promotion; low vision support; vision rehabilitation; eye research; professional assistance and community support.