From ‘health for all’ to ‘health for some’

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is concerned by the announcement in last night’s budget that the Australian Government plans to introduce co-payments to previously bulk billed Medicare services, and increase the co-payment for PBS-listed medicines.

Kathleen McLaughlin, ACN Executive Manager, said that ACN is deeply concerned that individuals and families will be burdened with co-payments they can ill-afford. Australia’s out-of-pocket expenditure for health care is already high compared to the OECD average, and Australians’ biggest share of these costs comes from paying for curative care and pharmaceuticals.

“Out-of-pocket costs create a barrier to consumers’ access to health care and this barrier is greatest for individuals who have the least ability to pay as well as people with chronic and complex conditions. The introduction of co-payments will undoubtedly undermine the very real principles of universal access and equity in health care that the introduction of Medicare enshrined,” said Ms McLaughlin.

Health services should be available to all members of our community on the basis of need, not the ability to pay. We already have evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics that 5.4% of Australians who needed to see a GP in 2012-13 delayed seeing or did not see a GP at least once because of the cost. The introduction of co-payments and the reduction of Medicare rebates will only see this figure increase.

Amongst the hardest hit will be people with chronic conditions. A recent study* found that people with chronic kidney disease, residing in Western Sydney, spent a mean of $907 every three months on out-of-pocket medical costs. For 71% of study participants this constituted more than 10% of their household income and 57% of households in the study reported financial hardship as a result. The budget measures announced last night will only add to the hardship of people already burdened by ill health.

Those in need of health care should not carry such a financial impost whilst there remains the opportunity to increase efficiencies and reduce wastage in our health care system.

ACN will be advocating on behalf of all Australians for the Government to re-consider the implementation of these inequitable health measures.

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* Footnote:
Essue, BM, Wong, G, Chapman J, Li, Q, Jan, S 2013 ‘How are patients managing the cost of care for

For interviews with Kathleen McLaughlin, please contact Diana Abeleven or Felicity Zadro on 02 9212 7867 or diana@zadrocommunications.com.au.

Images:

Kathleen McLaughlin, ACN Executive Manager