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GP GROUPS TO INTENSIFY CAMPAIGN FOR RESTORATION OF MEDICARE PATIENT REBATES FOR GP MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Australia's peak general practitioner coalition, United General Practice Australia (UGPA), today vowed to intensify its campaign to convince the Government to restore the Medicare patient rebates for GP mental health services that were drastically cut in the May Budget.

At a meeting last night at Parliament House involving UGPA leaders, Mental Health Minister Mark Butler and senior advisers from Health Minister Nicola Roxon's office, Minister Butler said there was no room for change or negotiation around the Government's mental health package.

UGPA put forward to the Minister the case that from November many people with mental illness would no longer be able to afford to see their GP – their first point of contact for care and advice – for mental health plans because the Medicare rebates will be between 25 per cent and 50 per cent lower than today.

UGPA pointed out that the Government's changes mean that Medicare would treat people with mental illness less favourably than people with a physical ailment, with rebates for GP Mental Health Plans dropping to between 10 per cent and 50 per cent lower than GP Management Plans for chronic illness.

UGPA remains determined to stay engaged with the Government to have the rebates restored.

UGPA will provide compelling evidence and arguments to show that the Budget cuts will seriously diminish vital frontline mental health services provided in the community by GPs.

If the Government fails to fully appreciate the key role of GPs in mental health care, UGPA believes it could set back meaningful primary health care reform across the board.

UGPA will urge Ministers Roxon and Butler to continue consulting closely with general practice to ensure the Government's primary care reforms are developed and implemented in ways that provide the greatest benefits to patients and communities – and that means maintaining GP leadership in primary care.

UGPA has also commenced talks with the key Independents about the importance to their electorates of accessible GP mental health services. UGPA will also be talking with the Opposition and The Greens in an effort to have the Budget cuts reversed.

While the Government's mental health reforms are being promoted as a \$2.2 billion package, independent analysis by *Access Economics* shows that the additional new money being invested in mental health amounts to just \$390 million in 'new' health money over the standard four-year Budget cycle.

The package withdraws funding from existing GP services that independent reviews have shown are working well.

The overwhelming feedback from general practices around the country is that people with mental illness will be severely disadvantaged by the new arrangements.

UGPA believes that the funding for GP mental health plans should be restored and that GPs should be given more support to play a greater role in mental health.

In the meantime, UGPA remains determined to convince the Government to reverse the Budget cuts through direct dialogue, lobbying of all MPs and Senators, and through grassroots involvement with local GPs and their patients.

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