Government’s cut to cataract rebate will hurt rural patients “enormously”

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has warned that the Federal Government’s plan to halve the Medicare rebate for cataract surgery will result in many rural and remote Australians being unable to afford the procedure, and could also dramatically reduce the number of city-based ophthalmologists willing to provide visiting cataract services in country Australia.

The Association has called on the Federal Government to meet urgently with it and the bodies representing ophthalmologists to ensure that all rural and remote Australians—including Indigenous Australians—can continue to access affordable cataract surgery on-the-ground in rural and remote locations into the future.

RDAA says a rural-loading should be added to the cataract rebate to better support resident and visiting ophthalmologists in providing cataract surgery in the bush, given the higher costs to these doctors in doing so.

RDAA has also joined the AMA in voicing its strong disapproval at an advertisement being webcast by the ALP, which unfairly attacks ophthalmologists for their fees in providing cataract surgery.

“It is outrageous that the Medicare rebate for cataract surgery, which has already been cut by 60% since 1985, should again be targeted for a further 50% cut without consulting the providers of this service, particularly given this surgery is so critical in restoring sight to many thousands of Australians each year” RDAA President, Dr Nola Maxfield, said.

“It is essential that the Minister sits down with RDAA and the ophthalmologists, and enters into meaningful negotiations to ensure that patients living in the bush can continue to access these services and that the additional costs of providing cataract surgery in rural and remote Australia are recognised.

“The ability for rural and remote Australians—including Indigenous Australians—to access cataract surgery in a timely fashion is crucial, particularly when you consider that, with a lack of public transport in the bush, those who lose their vision and cannot then drive are tremendously restricted in getting around.

“The hip pockets of many rural and remote Australians are already hurting badly from the drought, the economic downturn and poor agricultural prices—any cut to the Medicare rebate for cataract surgery unfortunately will make the difference for some rural and remote patients as to whether they can continue to have good vision.

“Many city-based ophthalmologists provide rural cataract surgery at great cost to themselves and out of a sense of community service—given more rural patients will be unable to afford cataract surgery under the Government’s proposed cut, the reduced patient demand could very well result in many visiting ophthalmologists simply being unable to provide cataract surgery in rural areas. This will have an extremely detrimental impact on the ability of many rural patients to access cataract surgery in their local region and, for some, it will mean not being able to afford or access the surgery in distant locations.

“Far from applying arbitrary cuts to the Medicare rebates, the Federal Government should instead be introducing a much-needed rural-loading to better support doctors in providing medical services in rural and remote areas.

“The Government must do all it can to ensure that people living in the bush continue to be able to access cataract surgery.”

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