

Submission to Senate

I am recent Graduate of Sydney University. I spent 8 years in total at university and a substantial amount of money (which I borrowed) to become a dentist. When I was interviewed for entrance to the Bachelor of dentistry programme, one of the questions I was asked was, "What is it that you do not like about Dentistry". My response was as follows, " I do not like that many people cannot afford dental treatment in this country and that treatment of the mouth is not covered under medicare whereas any other part of the body is covered" this response was greeted by synchronised nodding and sounds of approval from the interviewing panel.

I started my participation in the medicare dental scheme in late 2008 when I returned from working interstate. I was offered a job in a private practice in the Inner west of Sydney. At that time this was the only job I was offered and I took it gladly. I was immediately given many patients to treat. A substantial proportion of whom were under the Medicare scheme. Previously I had treated patients under the department of veterans affairs and was not required to do any paper work other than filling out the claim form. I assumed that medicare was the same as this. I was never given any information by medicare and when I looked up the medicare website I only found information about the teen dental voucher and information about how the government intended to discontinuing the medicare scheme for dental treatment.

The patients I was treating had appalling oral health. I had not seen such severe dental and oral disease in my career. Many of the patients presented for the first time in over twenty years or the first time ever to the dentist with gross tooth decay and gum disease affecting most of their teeth and gums. Many of the patients were seeking replacement of dentures they had worn for over thirty years. Some of these dentures were grossly discoloured and had visible mould growth covering them.

One particular case I remember was of a middle aged woman who was a recovered heroine addict who had no teeth and only rotting tooth remnants left in her mouth. She was unable to seek employment because of her physical appearance. She was also blending her food as she could not chew. Her treatment consisted of removal of the remaining teeth and provision of full dentures. This patient wept tears of joy when she received her dentures and was subsequently able to gain employment. I was very pleased to be able to provide much needed treatment to needy people. The great majority of my patients were elderly pensioners of limited financial means and all of them were medically compromised as evidenced by their long medical histories and long lists of medications. These patients would not be able to get treatment without the medicare scheme.

The patients referred under Medicare are more often than not ideal candidates for these treatments. It is not a failing of the system that these treatments are available and it is not over servicing when these treatments are provided. If the cost has blown out it is a failure of the government to anticipate the cost of the scheme. Dentists should not be punished for government miscalculations.

If the scheme is not affordable it must be modified or scrapped. The government must sit down with the opposition and independents/greens and come to a solution. The solution is not to hang out to dry dentists who had this scheme thrust upon them and who are trying to make an honest living. We

did not create this scheme and we did not block its cancellation. This a political problem which must find a political solution

Based on the information that was presented to me by the Australian Dental Association about the behaviour of medicare towards dentists who had acted in good faith and who had participated in the medicare scheme. I came to the decision that I would not participate in the Voluntary Self Audit by medicare. I did contact medicare on several occasions. On one Occasion I was warned by a medicare auditor "do you know what the consequences of not participating in the audit are" I did not respond to this as I perceived this as a threat. I was not given a list of consequences by medicare. The letter they had sent me stated that they would be conducting the audit whether or not I participated. I made up my mind that this was a witch hunt of dentists. The motives for this witch hunt appear be financial and political. It is now clear that dentists by and large have not rorted the system and have not charged for services they have not provided. It is also clear that dentists are a compliant group of professionals who were not educated on the paperwork requirements of this scheme. Requirements which were largely concocted retrospectively to entrap hard working honest dentists working under the scheme. There is clearly a move to discredit this scheme to plug a financial leak and to serve other political purposes. I thought to myself that justice would prevail and that not participating in the voluntary audit was the right thing to do on principle.

I still participate in the medicare scheme because I believe it is wrong to send away people in need who have a valid and legal referral from their doctor. This is especially relevant in the area that I practice in as most of the patients are of limited financial means and would not be able to pay for treatment otherwise. I am also philosophically in agreement with the premise that dental treatment should be available to all people as medical treatment is available to all under medicare. The people referred under this scheme to my practice were severely medically compromised and not wealthy.

If the argument by the department of human services is that dentists have proceeded with treatment without permission from the doctor then should there not be a requirement for doctors to not only sight but approve a dentists treatment plan. This would be illogical as family doctors are not qualified to diagnose and treatment plan dental disease. This would be like asking a family doctor to get a dentist to approve how they should treat a patient with high blood pressure. The truth of the matter is that whether or not a letter is sent by a particular date to the GP, the treatment does not change.

I am yet to hear from medicare with a result for the audit that I was informed would take place with or without my participation. It has been more than six months now. The stress of this audit has affected my working and family life. I nonetheless continue to practice dentistry to the best of my ability and continue to participate in the medicare scheme. I am completely compliant with the medicare scheme requirements as I have always strived to be based on the information presented to me. It is of note that all the information given to me on compliance and how to be compliant has been from the Australian Dental association not from medicare.

Compliance does not change the treatment I am providing for my patients or the treatment outcomes in any way. It is purely to satisfy the legal red tape which has been heaped on dentists to discourage them from participating in the scheme. Dentists targeted by medicare are those who

1. Are providing a lot of services to patients under medicare

2. Have had a complaint lodged by a patient

Most dentists who are providing a lot of services under medicare are those working in lower socioeconomic regions. They make less money servicing the less affluent and generally more unwell people of Australia. This is being punished.

Complaints by patients should be judged by an independent panel of clinicians based on the particular circumstances of a case. What medicare is doing is punishing dentists who have a complaint made against them based on a clinical issue with an audit of their compliance with paperwork. Most dentists have a complaint of some description against them at some point in their career and it is not necessarily due to poor practice. This system of punishment is outrageous.

I was working as an employee when I provided these services to patients and as such received only 40% of the net amount billed to medicare (after deduction of lab expenses). If medicare asks me to repay money I understand that they will ask for full repayment of all services claimed. This is also a great injustice

I am a young Dentist at the beginning of my working career with a young family who rely on me. I feel that a great injustice is being pursued by the government and hope that something will be done to end this saga.

Please reconsider the position of medicare and the government and allow me to continue my life without this issue.