

OUT OF POCKET EXPENSES

June '14 update:

CO-PAYMENT

In the wake of the Federal Budget, obviously some changes are on the way. One is the possible Medicare co-payment. Clearly this will add to the burden of cost that I will have, in addition to my usual medical costs. I do understand that there is a limit to the number of GP visits that will entail this cost. However my ongoing concern is that, if this is introduced, in future years the cost will rise. This is the thin edge of the wedge.

Of course, if I have to go to the doctor, I will manage somehow. It will mean that the money has to come from somewhere else – food, medications, I don't know. It is a bit frightening. Like many pensioners, I live a frugal life and budget from fortnight to fortnight. Usually I can manage so long as the medical costs are expected and scheduled. What is worrying is if illness or accident strikes. As well as the actual medical out-of-pocket costs, changes to pension indexation will mean that increases are lower and we will be poorer over time. Pensioners will struggle to manage as they fall into poverty.

CASCADE OF COSTS.

This is a real example, from 2010, to show how costs can be unexpected and can escalate.

I became ill with a skin infection. I saw a GP, who prescribed medication and took a swab. The infection necessitated some minor surgery and several visits to the GP in quick succession, with either GP or GP practice nurse attending to the wound. In addition I had the cost of different prescription medications. A few days later, on the basis of the test results, he prescribed different medication. One of these was penicillin.

After taking penicillin I had an allergic reaction. By then it was the weekend and my usual GP's surgery had closed. I spoke to the pharmacist, who suggested I really should speak to a doctor. Being unwell, I had limited capacity to make judgments about what would be the best course of action. I remembered that there is a locum doctor service at the local hospital and made an appointment. My daughter-in-law drove me there but was unable to wait, as their 3 children were then very young. I saw the locum, who told me to stop taking penicillin and see my own GP as soon as possible. The receptionist then told me that the fee was \$70. I had no idea there would be a fee. Because it was held at a hospital I assumed it was free. I knew I had a few dollars in my bank account but not enough to pay both the locum service and get a taxi home. I was too ill to travel by bus. The receptionist spoke to the doctor, who agreed I could be bulk-billed, which I very much appreciated. I know that in the future, if a similar circumstance arose, I would very likely not have enough to pay a locum then, either. Having to pay for a doctor would push me to go to hospital emergency department instead.

When I saw my own GP again, she immediately referred me to an immunologist, and she herself rang the specialist's rooms to get an appointment as urgently as possible.

MEDICALERT

The immunologist made the diagnosis of Stevens-Johnson syndrome. He strongly suggested I join MedicAlert and wear a piece of medical and identification jewellery. I have done this, purchased some jewellery and pay an annual membership. Current annual membership is \$30. The initial jewellery (\$50) didn't suit my lifestyle as well as I hoped – it can't get wet. I tended to take it off and leave it off. Now I have a metal bracelet (\$45), which is ideal.

This is an example of the kinds of things that can happen, with attendant costs to the patient all along the way. I'm sure other people have much worse stories to tell. With additional costs for GP visits and medications, and an unexpected immunologist's visit, I don't know where I would find the money – yet these visits were urgent, unexpected and necessary.

I rely solely on the pension and medical costs take up a large proportion of that. Of course, I still have other living costs. I am fortunate that I don't smoke or drink, and I live in subsidised housing. However I have family, and want to buy small birthday gifts for grandchildren. My elderly father lives interstate and I travel there once or twice a year to see him. If the Federal Government removes all travel concessions, which will be hard to do. Already I find myself on the line financially every fortnight. I have no idea how I will manage. Many pensioners are very fearful of the future.