

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Additional Estimates 2011-2012, 15 February 2012

Question: E12-154

OUTCOME 6: Rural Health

Topic: AFTER HOURS CARE IN RURAL AREAS

Written Question on Notice

Senator Boyce asked:

Please provide details of the following:

- a) On what basis does the Government justify its contention that the GP Helpline has reduced attendances at public hospital accident and emergency departments?
- b) On average, across all public hospitals in Australia how many attendances per week at accident and emergency departments have been avoided by the GP after hours Helpline?
- c) What are the numbers and percentages of calls to the GP Helpline that result in attendance to a public hospital accident and emergency department broken down by time of day?
- d) What is the current payment to doctors manning the after hours Helpline on an hourly basis after midnight and how does this compare with payments made to doctors who attend patients either in their surgeries or local hospitals when on call and providing face to face services after hours?

Answer:

- a) Between 6pm on 1 July 2011 and midnight on 12 February 2012, 99,508 callers were transferred to the *after hours GP helpline*. After speaking with the helpline GP 27,365 (27.5 per cent) callers were redirected from seeking urgent after hours treatment. These callers were provided with self care advice or advised that treatment could wait until the following day.
- b) Data are not available on attendances avoided at public hospital accident and emergency departments. However, 62,789 (63.1 per cent) callers were provided with self-care advice or advised to see a doctor in normal working hours by the telephone GP.
- c) Data are not available on the number of calls that result in attendance at hospital accident and emergency departments. 14,329 (14.4 per cent) of callers were advised to go to an emergency department immediately.

- d) The pay rates for helpline GPs are in line with market rates and is commercial-in-confidence by the service provider, Medibank Health Solutions.

Urgent after hours consultations provided at consultation rooms after midnight attract a Medicare rebate of \$147.20 for GPs and \$124.25 for other medical practitioners.

In the hospital setting, Medicare rebateable after hours services can only be provided in emergency departments of private hospitals or in designated public hospitals in rural and remote areas where there has been workforce shortages identified under the Council of Australian Governments *Improving Access to Primary Care in Rural and Remote Areas* exemption to Section 19(2) of the Health Insurance Act 1973.

In these situations, a Medicare rebate is available to patients of \$110.40 for GPs and \$93.20 for other medical practitioners where the service is provided after midnight, as part of an episode of hospital treatment.