

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2015 - 2016, 21 October 2015

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OUTCOME: 3 - Access to Medical and Dental Services

Topic: Optometry

Type of Question: Hansard Page 31, 21 October 2015

Senator: Siewert, Rachel

Question:

Senator SIEWERT: The schedule was cut in the beginning of the year, on 1 January, for optometry—sorry I do mean optometry.

Mr Bowles: Now I think we are back on the same page.

Mr Stuart: We were slightly confused; ophthalmology was five or six years ago.

Senator SIEWERT: Sorry. There are the cuts and also the freezing of the indexation process—so there are both things. Who was consulted?

Mr J Smith: This is an area relatively new to me. I would need to take on notice the consultation process in relation to that measure, I am sorry.

Senator SIEWERT: Yes, if you can take on notice that process and what modelling was undertaken to justify the cut and the freezing of the indexation. I am particularly interested in what follow-up you have done. The feedback that I am getting, particularly from those optometrists that are working remotely, particularly in Aboriginal communities, is that it is significantly impacting on the model that they use to provide service to those communities. What is the modelling, can we get it and what feedback have you had?

Mr J Smith: Again, I will need to take that on notice to make sure that I give you the correct answer. I know that there have been discussions with the industry and that there are issues relating to rural access, and that Indigenous access is an issue. But I would just need to take that on notice to give you the correct answer.

Senator SIEWERT: I want to be really clear: what discussions have you had, where you are up to in those negotiations and are you considering some approaches that will enable the current model, or an improved model, if you can work out an improvement, in communities so that these services are provided?

Answer:

Changes to Medicare eligible optometry rebates were announced as part of the 2014-15 Budget. All Budget deliberations and proceedings are Cabinet-in-Confidence.

To supplement remote services and ensure that people in regional, rural and remote locations maintain access to optometry and other eye health services the Government continues to fund the Rural Health Outreach Fund and the Visiting Optometrists Scheme. These programmes aim to address the higher costs associated with providing out-reach eye health services.

The Government also funds the Medical Outreach – Indigenous Chronic Disease Programme. The purpose of this programme is to improve access to a range of services provided by medical specialists, GPs, allied and other health professionals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It aims to enhance planning, coordination and integration of eye health services.