



Media Release

For Immediate Release

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Budget outcome falls short for optometry

Optometry Australia tonight said that the Australian Government missed a crucial opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to the eye health needs of millions of Australians with the decision not to lift immediately the freeze on indexation of optometry Medicare rebates.

Optometry Australia's national President Andrew Hogan said that while the return to indexation on GP bulk-billing incentive payments will commence from 1 July, optometrists will be forced to wait until 2019 for relief from the freeze and may be forced to introduce or increase fees for many patients.

"It sends a mixed message to provide an incentive for GPs to bulk-bill while failing to act immediately in the case of patients who need eye care.

"In fact, the need to act is even more pressing for optometry services because optometrists have had to bear not only a freeze on indexation since 2012 but they also endured a further cut to rebates in 2015", Mr Hogan said.

"It is extremely disappointing that the Government continues to treat optometry as a low healthcare priority when more than half the Australian population suffers from an eye health problem or condition that can either be prevented or managed to reduce risk of vision loss.

"While we are relieved that there is now a clear timeframe for optometry, we remain disappointed and frustrated that the freeze on indexation was not lifted immediately.

"This new deadline is marginally better than the previous target that the Government had set, but we lobbied hard to have the Government take action now.

"This remains our position that we will continue to take to Government," Mr Hogan said.

Mr Hogan said that millions of Australians could be penalised by this inequitable approach to Medicare rebates.

'The failure to lift the rebates hits hardest in those practices throughout Australia where patients have a heavy reliance on bulk-billing. As rebates continue to fall behind the cost of providing clinical care, the struggle to survive will remain real. There's a genuine threat to sustainability of services under those circumstances,' he said.

Optometry Australia estimates that Government investment in primary eye care through Medicare has decreased by an estimated \$103 million since 2015.

"For each month that Australians wait for the Government to lift the freeze and reinvest in their eye care, the economy is impacted by \$1.36 billion," Mr Hogan concluded.

The first round of indexation freezes for optometry was introduced in 2012. Optometry rebates were cut across the board in 2015 and the freeze on indexation was extended in 2016.

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Contact:

Kerry l'Anson, Optometry Australia – 0419 004 920 or k.ianson@optometry.org.au

Trinity Scarf, Optometry Australia – 0413 581 769 or t.scarf@optometry.org.au

Optometry Australia is the peak professional body for optometrists. Representing eight out of every ten Australian-based optometrists, Optometry Australia's focus is to lead and advance the profession of optometry by putting eye-health front and centre of Australian health care.