

HANDS OFF MEDICARE!

We get sick & we vote!

FACT SHEET 5

Why workers need Medicare

Under the Howard government out of pocket health expenses have increased while universal bulk billing rates have plummeted. This fatal combination means that increasingly your access to health care is being determined by your earning capacity. And of course, your ability to work depends on your good health – work and health are undeniably linked. This is why the maintenance and extension of Medicare and a high quality public health system are vitally important issues for workers and their families.

Workers recognised the need for a universal health insurance system years ago. Because of this Medicare is a core “social wage” issue for unions and their members. Medicare has always been supported by the Australian union movement. In 1984, workers agreed to a 2.6% wages discount to offset the effect on prices of introducing Medicare. We paid for Medicare then and we continue to pay for it for all Australians through our progressive taxation system. This is the fair way to ensure health care for all is based on need and not ability to pay.

Before Medicare health care was dispensed like charity to those who could not afford to pay for it. It was a humiliating experience for the patient. The power imbalance between patient and doctor is significant enough without instilling this unnecessary economic dimension.

Before Medibank (Medicare’s predecessor) was introduced in 1973, in South Australia the most common reason for imprisonment for debt was failure to pay medical bills. The Fraser coalition government undermined Medibank by stealth until it existed in name only. History can easily repeat itself given the fundamental philosophical shift that has occurred in health under the Howard government. Just think about your own out of pocket health expenses and how these have grown in recent years. These are set to get much worse under the Howard government’s agenda for health care. A safety net can never replace a universal system.

We are moving towards a US style “user pays” model for health care that leaves over 43 million Americans with no access to health cover and 8 out of 10 of these are workers and their dependents. Another 38 million are underinsured. In total one third of Americans are either uninsured or under insured. Workers with bargaining power can secure employer sponsored health schemes – those without power simply fend for themselves. Even those with employer sponsored health plans are seeing these threatened with company liability for such schemes becoming unsustainable. As corporate health care costs in America skyrocket, some large US firms are considering relocating operations to Canada as their liability for health costs would decrease significantly because of Canada’s universal tax payer funded health system.

Health care must be seen as a social good and a right not charity or welfare. Medicare is a demonstration of dual solidarity in our community – between the sick and the well and the rich and the poor. It is more than just a health insurance scheme – it represents a “fair go” for all in health care. Unions and their members must continue to demand:

- The restoration of bulk billing for all Australians as the cornerstone of Medicare
- Better funding of public health services
- The establishment of a National Health Reform Council so that we all have the opportunity to have a direct say about our needs, our expectations in our health system.



Speak out for the good of your health. Tell your friends how much Medicare means to you.



Let your Federal MP know how much you care! Visit www.aph.gov.au to find out your MP’s contact details. Write a letter to your local newspaper.



For further information and campaign materials go to the QNU website (<http://www.qnu.org.au>) or contact the QNU on 07 3840 1444.



Join your union or community group to participate in the Hands Off Medicare campaign. To find out which union or community group you can join, visit www.qnu.org.au.

