

Budget Cuts a Health Risk

Australasia's peak diagnostic body, the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA), warns that the astonishing 10% funding cuts to Pathology in last night's Budget is of extreme concern, and could have long term implications for Australians' access to high quality pathology services.

The President of the RCPA, Dr Bev Rowbotham, says good pathology services underpin good healthcare.

"Over the last 20 years, Australians have had access to the best and most accessible pathology services in the world," says Dr Rowbotham.

"Pathologists diagnose all cancers in Australia and pathology testing is vital to the health of the many Australians with diabetes, high cholesterol, arthritis, cancers and other chronic diseases."

The RCPA says the Government has not paid any attention to the many representations by the pathology profession about the need for adequate funding to support these high quality pathology services.

The Government continues to talk of the savings to be delivered by automation, but pathologists have repeatedly stressed to Government that the efficiencies from automation and amalgamation of laboratories have already been delivered over the last 10 years through cooperative agreements with past governments.

"Pathology is not about machines," says Dr Rowbotham.

"It is about people.

"Over 40,000 people work in pathology practices throughout Australia and half of these people are involved in the collection of samples from patients, yet it is these collection fees that the Government has cut.

"The cuts are astounding and show a lack of understanding of the role and importance of pathology in the delivery of quality healthcare services, and the expertise of individual pathologists as medical specialists."

Dr Rowbotham says the College is extremely concerned about how laboratories can actually deliver these savings and have major concerns over access for patients to services and potential for the quality of services to be compromised.

The Budget also included an initiative to try to maintain bulk billing levels in pathology, which have been the highest of any medical profession. If the pathology practices chose to use this incentive, the cut will still be of the order of 7%.

Another area of major concern to the College is the loss of the referrers' (i.e. usually GP's) right to select the pathologist they wish to refer to. Pathology is a medical

specialty like any other area of medicine and requesting doctors should have the professional right to determine who they refer their patients to, if quality is not to be compromised.

“Pathologists are highly educated and knowledgeable medical specialists, with a minimum 12-13 years tertiary and post tertiary education,” says Dr Rowbotham.

However, the RCPA also acknowledges the Budget does contain some areas worth noting and applauding.

For example Government will continue to support 30 existing pathology training positions, in addition to funding an additional 20 new positions for four years. The Pathology workforce is in crisis and this will make a contribution to solving this problem.

Additionally, more detailed analysis is needed of the proposed National Referral Service.

“The National Referral Service, if based on the premise of the National Prescribing Service (NPS), has the potential to provide ongoing education for the general and medical community of appropriate testing.

“Appropriate testing is in everyone’s best interest, encouraging best-practice utilisation of limited resources, and providing quality healthcare diagnostic outcomes.”

The RCPA is the leading organisation representing pathologists in Australasia. Its mission is to train and support pathologists and to improve the use of pathology testing to achieve better healthcare.

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