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ASA Media Release: The continued freeze on diagnostic imaging in the Federal Budget risks the health of all Australians

Yesterday the Government handed down its 2017-2018 Budget claiming it demonstrated a rock solid commitment to guaranteeing Medicare for all Australians. The Australasian Sonographers Association commends the Government for retaining bulk-billing incentives for GP, pathology and diagnostic imaging services.

The Government has also recognised the impact that freezing Medicare indexation has on patients' access to healthcare. The Australasian Sonographers Association strongly supports restoring indexation of the Medicare rebates for GP, specialist and allied health services over the next two years. However, we are greatly disappointed by the decision to delay indexation for diagnostic imaging until 2020.

Diagnostic imaging is essential in the diagnosis, management and treatment of many health conditions, with ultrasound being the most commonly-accessed diagnostic imaging service. Unfortunately supporting Australians' access to these services has been neglected by successive governments, with Medicare rebates for diagnostic imaging having already been frozen for almost two decades. Indexing for all diagnostic imaging tests, including ultrasound, must have indexation resumed rather than the limited imaging modalities mentioned in the budget documents.

Every year the cost of living goes up. So too does the cost of providing quality and accessible health and diagnostic services. All Australians should have access to affordable high-quality diagnostic imaging and services to assure their best possible care and quality of life. Australians need indexation of Medicare rebates for diagnostic imaging to be restored now, not in three years' time.

Background

Previous governments have expected that Australians are getting sustained or enhanced provision of diagnostic imaging services at no extra cost; nothing could be further from the truth. Freezing indexation of these services actually:

- puts financial pressure on the provision of these services since equipment maintenance and staffing costs have steadily increased in line with consumer price indexation (CPI)
- puts the highly-skilled workforce providing these services, including sonographers, under physical and emotional stress
- puts patients at risk of incomplete or misdiagnosis of treatable disease due to the pressures on the services and individuals providing diagnostic imaging
- puts patients at risk of poor management of their health conditions as many patients forgo essential imaging tests due to the increased out-of-pocket cost.

For ultrasound alone the average out-of-pocket cost for services has grown by 117% over the last thirteen years. As a result, many disadvantaged and at-risk Australians are neglecting their health as they cannot afford the increasing out-of-pocket costs.

Before the 2016 election, the Coalition claimed to recognise the historical neglect of diagnostic imaging and the essential role it plays in supporting the health of Australians. At this time the Coalition stated they would "[ensure that diagnostic imaging indexation resumes when the current GP rebate indexation freeze concludes](#)".

The Australasian Sonographers Association congratulates the Government's recognition of the importance of Australians having access to affordable healthcare by removing the Medicare rebate freeze for GP services and retaining bulk-billing incentives for GP, pathology and diagnostic imaging services, and supports this action.





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However, we strongly urge the Government to honour its election promise regarding the resumption of indexation for diagnostic imaging. Without this, many disadvantaged and at-risk Australians will continue to experience poor health outcomes due to being unable to afford these essential services.

KEY POINTS

- The Australasian Sonographers Association calls on the Government to honour its election promise to “*ensure that diagnostic imaging indexation resumes when the current GP rebate indexation freeze concludes*”
- Diagnostic imaging is essential in the diagnosis, management and treatment of many health conditions, with ultrasound being the most commonly accessed diagnostic imaging service
- Without indexation, many disadvantaged and at risk Australians will continue to experience poor health outcome due to being unable to afford these essential services
- For ultrasound alone the average out-of-pocket cost for patients has grown by 117% over the last thirteen years due to indexation being frozen
- All diagnostic imaging tests, including ultrasound, should be indexed rather than the limited imaging modalities mentioned in the budget documents.

For more information contact:

Dr Jennifer Alphonse

President

Australasian Sonographers Association

P: (03) 9552 0000

E: president@as-a.com.au

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