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MEDICARE REBATE CUTS BRING MORE (ARTHRITIC) PAIN TO ELDERLY AUSTRALIANS

AMA President, Dr Andrew Pesce, said today that removal of the Medicare rebate for synovial joint injections to relieve the pain and discomfort of arthritic joints will cause financial and physical suffering for thousands of elderly Australians.

The typical patient who needs a joint injection is a person in their sixties or seventies with intractable knee or shoulder pain while on the waiting list – sometimes for years – for a joint replacement. It is a common treatment for Indigenous Australians. The Government expects the medical profession to absorb this service as part of a standard patient consultation.

Dr Pesce said many older Australians would now have to pay a minimum \$23 per injection for up to 25 injections per patient per year, which is a lot of money for a pensioner or person on limited income.

“This is another example of a random Budget cut made for base economic reasons without any consultation with the medical profession about the cost of providing the service or the health impact on patients,” Dr Pesce said.

“And once again it is hitting the most vulnerable people in the community.

“Our GP members tell us that synovial joint injections are among the most gratifying treatments for patients – they walk in with pain and walk out with a smile.

“As many of these patients must wait years for a transplant, the joint injections keep them mobile and pain-free.

“The injections are a better treatment for elderly patients because it avoids the need for strong painkillers, which can increase the risk of falls and injury.

“The procedure is most commonly performed by GPs and rheumatologists, and the patients are often infirm with limited mobility, and sometimes with walking frames.

“To suggest that joint injections can be incorporated into a standard consultation is proof that the Government has been poorly advised on this decision.

“Older Australians are already spending too much time on waiting lists for treatment. This latest Medicare rebate cut means that, for many of them, their wait will now be long and painful.”

The Medicare patient rebate for synovial joint injections disappears from 1 November 2009, concurrent with the halving of the rebate for cataract surgery, when the Health Insurance (General Medical Services Table) Regulations commence.

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