

**Report on the Medicare Australia Consumer Communication  
Group Meeting  
3 March 2006 – Canberra**

This was the first meeting of the Consumer Communication Group (CCG) since mid-June 2005. This continues the trend of long gaps between meetings noted at the beginning of the last Report where the preceding meeting had been held in October 2004. This March 2006 meeting had been scheduled for October 2005. Once again it means that there are several new representatives on the group, a lack of continuity and a difficulty in getting follow-up in some items. Nevertheless the stability of consumer representation on the CCG is greater than that of the Medicare Australia (MA) staff.

However, it must be noted that the HIC has undergone major changes since the middle of last year. The name has been changed to Medicare Australia, and it has been subsumed into the Department of Human Services (DHS) with Joe Hockey as Minister. In addition MA has acquired a raft of additional services to administer – Family Tax Benefits, and all Family Assistance measures. There have been a large number of staff changes, and a large amount of time and effort put into staff training and assimilation of the new roles. The new MA-CCG team is enthusiastic and committed to the consultation process, and it is intended that there will be another CCG meeting in three months time.

Items discussed at the meeting were:

**1. Forms and Letters Review**

Minister Hockey has requested a review of all materials sent out from DHS, whether in hard or soft copy, e.g. Forms, Letters. The brief is to minimise duplication of messages, use consistent wording (with emphasis on use of Plain English) and using appropriate font/colour contrast etc. to suit vision impaired clients. The review includes investigating the use of alternative contact methods, such as phone calls and the Internet. MA is also to review their methods of payment (Cheques, cash from MA Offices, and Eftpos transfers) so that time lag for reimbursements is eliminated or minimised. At present

legislation prevents direct claiming from the Doctor's surgery, although a Claim may be lodged electronically from dedicated Internet booths at an increasing number of surgery locations.

## **2. MA Offices**

All MA Offices are now branded as 'Medicare Australia/Family Assistance'. Offices will be open for longer hours on weekdays (including to 1900) and on Saturday mornings in many areas depending on demographics and demand. Already the extension to 1700 closing has had the greatest uptake by clients. Electronic queue systems will be managed by visual display/voice call. All desk areas will be at seated height, with chairs for clients. Chairs in the waiting area will have arms and be of a height to enable older clients to use them safely and comfortably. Staff members will be assigned to assist clients in the waiting area. Graphic design of wall signage, information and posters will be to maximise their readability for all clients, including those with disabilities. The rollout of the new design will commence with those offices which are in new locations. Offices will continue to be located within shopping complexes/areas. Existing Offices will undergo varying degrees of upgrading depending on their age, location etc.

The KPI for Queue times is for less than 10 minutes. The majority of wait times are currently less than 2 minutes.

**ACTION:** 1. Kim Stabler, Manager MA Offices, is to consult with BCA on the design of the Electronic Console for its accessibility for people who are blind.

2. Feedback on the new design from all clients is sought.

## **3.**

#### **4. Roll-out of extended services to MA Offices**

The Family Assistance Office (FAO) commenced in July 2000, and operates in over 550 offices in Medicare, Centrelink and ATO shopfronts. The FAO services include:

- Family Tax Benefit Part A (providing assistance with the cost of raising children)
- Family Tax Benefit Part B ((providing additional assistance to families on one income)
- Childcare Benefit (offsetting childcare costs)
- Maternity payment (helping with the extra costs of a new baby)
- Maternity Immunisation Allowance (paid where children are up-to-date with immunisation).

Roll-out is implemented in phased approach built around the training of staff using the Centrelink training program, and is expected to be complete to all 238 MA Offices by December 2006.

#### **5. Telephony Services**

MA Telephony Services, in 9 call centres, handle 13 million calls per annum (50% of the volume handled by Centrelink), with 80% of the calls being from the Health Industry. However Teleclaiming is promoted to those with restricted access to MA Offices, e.g. people with disabilities and those in remote areas. Telephone Interpreter Services can be accessed for Teleclaiming.

The current Phone # for complaints/praise is 1800 118861. Complaints are handled by specially trained staff. The total number of complaints in 2005 was 785.

ACTION: Sue to follow up with Trevor Deeming, Telephony Services as to whether a TTY number will be available for Teleclaiming and/or complaints, or whether the NRS would have to be used.
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#### **6. Online Claiming**

Increasing numbers of people are registering for online services, with the registration process having high level of security, and enabling individuals on the one card to have exclusive access to their own claiming. The layout of web pages and registration process will be consistent across all areas of DHS, and will conform to W3C standards.

The Commonwealth Public Service currently makes greater use of instructional icons to improve useability of site by people with poor literacy skills in English. MA is to investigate greater use of icons.

**ACTION:** 1. Sue/Denise Blayden (MA) to find out whether BCA or any other organisation/persons were consulted about on-line services

2. Sue/Denise to get feedback from users of screen reader programs as to the useability of the current DHS and MA homepages.

## **7. Smartcards**

The introduction of Smartcards is a high priority for Minister Hockey. The trial of the MA Smartcards in Tasmania continues. There has been an understandable slow but steady take-up rate, because as yet the Smartcards only hold a small amount of additional information, so there is no real advantage to signing up to the scheme. Those who do so are really only demonstrating their in-principal approval of the technology. Although privacy issues have been raised by Civil Rights groups and CCG Reps, MA is consistent in affirming that individuals will have to 'opt in' to each information bank, and will be able to nominate which services may have access to any information item, e.g. emergency services able to access medical condition, drug and allergy information.

An issue which remains unresolved is now the National e-Health Training Authority (NeHTA) system will interact with the MA systems and Smartcard technology.

## **8. National e-Health Transition Authority**

This is a private company set up by Government in 2004 to investigate matters concerning online delivery of health related services. It is responsible for setting national standards and parameters for services to be included. At a COAG meeting (10 February) joint funding for the establishment of Individual Healthcare Identifier was approved. The IHI will improve patient care by ensuring that the right patient gets the right treatment.

## **9. Customer Service Institute of Australia**

MA has followed up its initial assessment from CSIA, and despite the huge changes which have occurred has improved its rating – obviously a credit to them but also a boost to maintaining staff focus and good morale.

## **10. Newsletter Material**

Representatives were given a folder of articles about MA/FAO services suitable for distribution to member organisations' constituents. The article titles are:

- Medicare Claiming Questions (e.g. How Can I make a Claim?; Telephone claiming; Doctor Surgery Claiming);
- Are you after information about Medicare and other health programs in community languages?
- Medicare – keeping your details up to date;
- Is your family registered for the Medicare Safety Net;
- Medicare Australia – Guidelines to enhance access to our communication resources; and
- Travelling with medicine overseas.

<p><b>ACTION:</b> Sue to request e-copies of the articles to forward to AFDO for distribution as deemed necessary/helpful for constituents.</p>
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I have made an initial follow-up on all Action Items. Please contact me for further information/clarification on any point.

The next meetings are scheduled for 7 July 2006 and 6 October 2006.

Sue Salthouse

14 March 2006