



Maureen O'Keefe (L), CEO of the Australian College of Optometry, hands to Genevieve Quilty more than 1,100 signatures for the petition calling for fairer Medicare rebates

Petition tabled on Parliamentary Advocacy Day

18,000 signatures support fairer rebates

OPTOMETRISTS from all around the nation met in Canberra in October, with a strong message about the importance of investing in primary eye care endorsed with the signatures of more than 18,000 Australian optometry patients.

Labor MP Anna Burke, the member for the Victorian seat of Chisholm and a former Speaker of the House, tabled the patient petition in the House of Representatives Federation Chamber on 19 October.

The petition calls on the Australian Government to lift the freeze on the indexation of Medicare, and reverse the five per cent cut to rebates that has deeply concerned many optometrists and their patients since its introduction in January 2015.

Fifteen optometrists, led by Optometry Australia president Kate Gifford, held 26 meetings with members of parliament and advisors to key ministerial staff, ensuring the message about 'Eye care for all' was disseminated

widely in the national capital.

Meetings were held with a total of 23 government MPs, Opposition members and key cross-benchers, and with advisers to both the Minister for Health, Sussan Ley and the Minister for Rural Health, Fiona Nash.

There were particularly productive discussions around Medicare billing arrangements, with the possibility raised of optometrists being able to both bulk-bill and charge a gap fee.

Optometry Australia CEO Genevieve Quilty said the day was a great step in the campaign to ensure optometry remained a thriving and viable profession.

Optometrists were able to talk frankly with MPs about the significant role their services are playing in primary and preventative eye care, and provide to the nation's policy

and decision makers first-hand insights into the effect of the rebate cut and indexation freeze.

'There was a lot of positive engagement, particularly relating to how to support patients who are unable to make their own contribution to health-care costs,' Ms Quilty said. 'We will be following up these opportunities over coming weeks.'

'The collection of more than 18,000 signatures from patients right across Australia indicates just how important it is to patients that the services optometrists are providing on a daily basis in communities remains accessible for them, now and into the future,' Ms Quilty said.

'This will shine the spotlight on that issue in the House of Representatives.'

Ms Quilty praised the great effort and contribution made by

the team of Optometry Australia members who participated in the day.

Graeme Wood owns an independent practice in the Melbourne suburb of Essendon, one of many around the country involved with generating support from patients. More than 1,000 of Mr Wood's patients put their name to the petition and they will be delighted with its tabling.

Mr Wood said his patients were surprised to hear about the cuts and particularly concerned to hear that even without any further erosion of Medicare rebates, the practice would be unable to continue bulk-billing.

Mr Wood believes it is important to the patients in his practice, which includes many people on low incomes, to be able to maintain his current policy.

Members are able to see a video of the tabling of the petition, posted by Ms Burke on her Facebook page, Anna Burke MP.

The video has also been shared on the Optometry Australia Facebook page, and members who participated are welcome to share this with their patients, particularly those who contributed their signature.

In her accompanying post, Ms Burke notes that: 'Combined with the freeze on Medicare rebates, optometry consultation rebates are now \$10 less than they should be.'

'This is making it harder for people on low incomes to address their eye-care needs and making it harder for optometrists to meet the needs of their clients,' Ms Burke wrote.

Ms Quilty welcomed the support for optometry from patients across the country who contributed to the petition, and encouraged members to widely share the news that it had been successfully tabled.