

15 July 2026

From Dr Vida Viliunas, President, Australian Society of Anaesthetists (ASA)

The article, “Labor Left pushes for hard cap on specialist doctor fees” [12 July] about specialist fees is an important one, but it is also one that deserves greater context than simply focusing on patient out-of-pocket costs. Out-of-pocket expenses tell only one small part of a much larger story.

No doctor wants financial barriers to prevent patients from accessing care. It is misleading to suggest that affordability challenges can be solved simply by capping specialist fees. Such an approach risks treating the symptom while ignoring the underlying causes.

For many years, Medicare rebates have failed to keep pace with inflation or the real cost of delivering specialist medical care. At the same time, private health insurance premiums have continued to rise while insurer rebates paid to specialists have not kept pace with the increasing costs of providing safe, high-quality care.

Specialists have absorbed increasing costs associated with staffing, professional indemnity insurance, equipment, technology, accreditation and regulatory compliance. These are costs that are essential to maintaining Australia's high standards of specialist care but are rarely acknowledged in discussions about affordability.

Australia's healthcare system relies on a delicate balance between public and private care. Many specialists work across both sectors, often subsidising public hospital services through their private practice. Policies that artificially suppress fees without addressing the erosion of Medicare rebates or the funding pressures across the broader health system risk making private practice less viable, increasing pressure on already overstretched public hospitals and ultimately reducing patient access to timely care.

The Australian Medical Association is correct in observing that governments should be asking why Medicare rebates have not kept pace with the costs of care and why public hospitals remain under increasing pressure. Those are the questions that deserve greater attention.

The solution is not to single out one group of healthcare professionals. It is to undertake genuine reform that addresses the funding of the entire healthcare system.

That means appropriately indexing Medicare rebates, ensuring private health insurance arrangements deliver value for patients, improving transparency across all parts of the system, and investing in the workforce that Australians rely upon every day.

Australians deserve a conversation about healthcare affordability that is evidence-based, balanced and focused on long-term sustainability - not one that reduces a complex issue to a single number on an invoice.

Dr Vida Viliunas
President