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Patients lose out as health debate loses focus

Australians continue to access private hospitals in increasing numbers, despite decreasing private health insurance participation, says Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) CEO Michael Roff.

Addressing claims by Opposition Health Spokesperson Catherine King in the health debate at the National Press Club that 'we're seeing demand in private hospitals going down', Mr Roff said the numbers tell a different story.

"According to the most recent Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) data, episodes of care in the private sector rose 2.2 percent in 2018, accounting for 3,681,533 privately insured hospital admissions.

"This continues a trend that began nearly 20 years ago, with no sign of going backwards," he said.

Mr Roff said both major parties need to commit to helping lower income Australians access the high quality services provided in private hospitals.

"Households on lower incomes face a 'double whammy' of increased premiums and reduced rebates because every year the value of their private health insurance rebate goes down.

"For example, in 2019 a high-income earner who does not receive the rebate would have experienced a premium increase of 3.25 percent. However, low-income earners would have experienced a real premium increase of 3.74 percent.

"At the very least, the value of the rebate for low income earners should be frozen to remove this regressive anomaly," he said.

If Australians are not able to access the private system, more pressure will be placed on public hospitals.

"Let's not forget that private hospitals provide 40 percent of all admissions and 60 percent of all surgery. Public hospital waiting lists would blow out if even a proportion of this workload was transferred from private to public. This would result in a two-tiered system where only the rich could avoid waiting lists by accessing private hospitals.

"Australians value private hospital care. They want access to care when they need it, from the doctor they choose and the high quality of care and attention they receive privately. The numbers show us that Australians continue to access private hospitals given the choice and opportunity, governments should be providing more choice of care, not less," Mr Roff said.

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