

One million Aussies with chronic pain worse off under Government's Private Health insurance changes

Existing health fund holders forced to upgrade or miss out on treatment options

The new Private Health Insurance (PHI) policy changes will make access to effective chronic pain treatment through private hospitals inaccessible for one-in-two current PHI policy holders. This could amount, to well over a million individuals with chronic pain.

Neuromodulation Society of Australia and New Zealand (NSANZ) is concerned that under the Government's new PHI changes, Australian patients living with chronic pain will not be covered unless they hold the top-tier Gold policy.

NSANZ is calling for the Government to guarantee that all existing procedures be made available in Bronze, Silver and Gold policies.

On July 15, 2018, Federal Minister for Health, The Hon. Greg Hunt MP stated, *"that under the proposed changes to the PHI policy, there would be no change in price or coverage."*

NSANZ want to ensure both the Government and Minister Hunt deliver on this promise to Australians living in chronic pain.

"We are committed to working with the Government to ensure patients continue to receive the coverage they currently have under their existing policies for access to chronic pain procedures," said Dr Richard Sullivan, Pain Medicine Specialist Physician and NSANZ President, Victoria.

"This means all existing procedures must be made available in Bronze, Silver and Gold policies.

"We believe the Minister is committed to doing so, but if not, we echo the call of Medical Technology Association of Australia (MTAA), that implementation of the policy changes should be deferred. Deferral of the matter will ensure we have sufficient time to achieve the best outcome for all patients living with chronic pain," said Dr Sullivan.

One in five Australians, including children and adolescents, will experience chronic pain in their lifetime. However, up to 80 per cent of those living with chronic pain are currently missing out on vital treatment that could improve their overall health and wellbeing, and quality of life.

The proposed changes will profoundly impact Australians living with chronic pain, including adults and children, and those who care for them. The touted changes will also result in a significant blow-out of public waiting lists for chronic pain services.

Josh, 33, Port Macquarie, lived with chronic pain for more than a decade before undergoing life-changing treatment.

"After years of riding the medication merry-go-round, surgery was the best option to help treat my chronic pain. Fortunately, the surgery was covered by my health insurance policy.

"However, it was touch-and-go for a while because we had to literally decide whether to fund the surgery ourselves, or have somewhere to live.

"I can't imagine what other Australians will face should treatments for chronic pain no longer be covered under the Government's private health insurance changes," Josh said.

According to the *High Price of Pain* report, conducted by Access Economics in collaboration with the MBF Foundation and the University of Sydney Pain Management Research Institute, chronic pain costs the Australian economy an estimated \$34 billion each year, and is the nation's third most costly health problem.¹

"We support the Government's goal to make private health insurance more transparent and affordable. However, chronic pain insurance reimbursements accounted for only approximately 0.5 per cent (\$100 million) of the \$19.8 billion total premium reimbursements paid in 2016/2017,"² said Dr Marc Russo, Pain Medicine Specialist Physician and NSANZ Director-at-large, New South Wales.

"As such, there are no major savings to be made from excluding chronic pain coverage from Bronze and Silver policies."

In July 2018, Minister Hunt pledged his support to Pain Australia, with the announcement of funding for a national action plan on chronic pain management to improve the quality of life for millions of Australians living with pain, their families and carers.^{3,4}

"NSANZ wishes to ensure Minister Hunt stays true to his commitment to Australians with chronic pain, by including chronic pain in Bronze, Silver and Gold PHI policies," Dr Russo said.

To learn more, head to www.accessforpain.com.au

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MEDIA INTERVIEWS & INFORMATION

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AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

- Dr Richard Sullivan: Pain Medicine Specialist Physician, President, Neuromodulation Society of Australia and New Zealand, Kew, Victoria.
- Dr Marc Russo: Pain Medicine Specialist Physician, Director-At-Large Neuromodulation Society of Australia and New Zealand, Newcastle, New South Wales
- Dr Nick Christelis: Pain Medicine Specialist Physician, Secretary Neuromodulation Society of Australia and New Zealand, Frankston, Victoria.
- Josh, 33, Port Macquarie, lived with chronic pain for a decade, following routine hernia operation, before undergoing life-changing surgery covered under his PHI policy.

References

1. <http://fpm.anzca.edu.au/documents/thehighpriceofpainfinal-185.pdf>
2. https://www.gph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Flag_Post/2017/December/Whither_the_private_health_insurance_rebate
3. <https://www.medianet.com.au/releases/165744/>
4. <http://www.painaustralia.org.au/media/newsletters/issue-80/greg-hunt-backs-national-pain-action-plan>