

HEALTH

There will be no Medicare rebates when GPs order knee MRIs for the over 50s from November 1

Sue Dunlevy, National Health Reporter, News Corp Australia Network

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EXCLUSIVE

OLDER Australians will be denied Medicare rebates for GP-ordered knee MRIs from November and will have to wait months to see a specialist or pay up to \$500 for a scan.

The age discrimination rationing system will hit around 80,000 Australians a year aged over 50.

It comes after the Government's Medicare review found the number of knee MRIs had more than tripled in five years and costs to taxpayers spiralled from \$16 million to \$38 million.

National Seniors, a lobby group with more than 130,000 members, said it is important to control costs but is demanding the government explain why the measure is not ageist.

"The idea of picking on people that are 50 does seem to be ageist to me," National Seniors chief advocate Ian Henschke said.

"How fair is it that a 49-year-old can get a rebate but a 50-year-old can't," he said.

More than 9400 Australians have signed a petition protesting the change and a campaign to overturn the rule is being backed by prominent sportspeople.



Olympic basketballer Rachael Sporn says the new changes are discriminatory. Picture: Che Chorley/Supplied

Three-time Olympic basketball medallist Rachael Sporn, 50, said older Australians deserve the same access to scans as everyone else.

“Like millions of Australians I do everything I can to keep fit as I get older, so it makes me angry that the Government is penalising me because of my age,” she said.

“It seems completely contradictory that we’re constantly encouraging older Australians to stay healthy while, at the same time, we’re making access to critical healthcare harder and more expensive. It doesn’t make sense.”

Former North Melbourne premiership player and former Sydney Swan Wayne Schwass, who turns 50 at the end of November, said it was “ridiculous” and “farcical” of the government to actively discourage people from looking after their health because of the associated costs involved with getting an MRI.



📍 Former AFL player Wayne Schwass describes the government’s move as “farcical”. Picture: Michael Klein

Australian Diagnostic Imaging Association president Dr Siavash Eshaghi said making people pay specialist fees just to get a knee MRI so they can keep healthy “is like an ageing tax for over 50s”.

“It will be worse for people in regional areas who will be forced to wait in pain for an MRI until the next available appointment with the visiting specialist in their town or travel long distances at their own cost to get an appointment,” he said.

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners president Dr Harry Nespolon says knee MRI’s do not add a lot to the diagnosis of osteoarthritis of the knee and it was probably the case GPs were ordering too many.

“Like all these things in medicine you learn,” he said.

However, he said the blanket ban on GP’s ordering knee MRI’s for anyone over 50 meant they would also be banned from ordering the scans for people who sustained severe knee injuries in an accident or when playing sport.

These people now face the expense of two expensive specialist visits – one to get referral for an MRI and then another to have the results reviewed instead of having a GP order the scan.

This costs Medicare many hundreds of dollars and the patient around \$100 out of pocket for each specialist visit.

“The impact of the measure should be reviewed to see if there are groups in the community who are adversely affected by the decision,” Dr Nespolon said.