

# Medicare safety net catching on again

Sid Marris

MORE people are finding a doctor who will bill Medicare for their visit, and the overall cost of seeing a GP is beginning to fall, as more families qualify for the Howard Government's safety net.

Figures for September showed a small increase in the bulk billing rate across the nation, to 69.1 per cent, a rise of 5.3 per cent for the year.

The reversal in the decline of bulk-billing — where the patients receive free care because the doctors charge the standard fee and bill it back to Medicare directly — came after the Government introduced extra payments for doctors who bulk-billed the elderly, children, or were working in regional areas.

The biggest increase was in Tasmania, up 14.8 per cent for the year, which had the lowest national rate and got the most from the extra payments.

The average extra amount paid by patients who saw doctors who did not bulk-bill fell modestly in September, from \$6.22 to \$5.98. The fall in part reflects those families who pass the safety net threshold — \$300 for individuals or \$700 for families — which qualifies them to get back 80 cents for every dollar of out-of-pocket expenses.

The size of out-of-pocket expenses for pregnant women going to obstetricians rose sharply.

However, doctors said this was because an upfront fee that used to be charged was now included under the Medicare system, so it could no longer be counted under the safety net.

The Australian Medical Association's vice-president, Mukesh Haikerwal, said that it was possible the rate could be sustained or improved when the Government introduced its election promise of a \$500 million boost to doctor and patient Medicare rebates.

Doctors who bulk-bill will receive an extra \$5 from the existing \$25.70 standard fee from January 1, as will patients who claim at Medicare offices.

Health Minister Tony Abbott said the figures showed a significant turnaround in bulk-billing rates since the introduction of its \$5 billion Medicare package last year.

But Labor health spokeswoman Julia Gillard said the improvement was a far cry from the 80 per cent rate under Labor in 1986.

## BULK BILLING RATES

