

ALP uses Bob Hawke to boost its campaigning on health

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Labor has pledged to spend A\$2 billion more than the Coalition on hospitals over four years and brought Bob Hawke into the election campaign, as it returns focus to the issue of health.

A Shorten government would invest the funds to improve hospital services and reduce elective surgery and emergency department waiting times, the ALP policy says. “Labor will recommit to funding 50% of the efficient growth in hospital costs over the next four years.”

An ALP government would as well look at the future role the Commonwealth might play in subacute care, including rehabilitation, palliative care, geriatric evaluation and management and psychogeriatric care.

The opposition also announced \$100 million over two years to strengthen primary health care.

A [TV advertisement featuring Hawke](#) ramps up the ALP scare campaign, claiming a re-elected Coalition would privatise Medicare – which the government flatly denies. Rather, the government is considering outsourcing the Medicare payments system.

In the advertisement the former prime minister says: “In 1983 the Hawke Labor government introduced Medicare. The Liberals were totally against it. And now the Liberals have set up a Medicare privatisation taskforce. Everybody knows you don’t set up a Medicare privatisation taskforce unless you aim to privatise Medicare.”

Meanwhile, Health Minister Sussan Ley announced the Coalition would improve the clarity and transparency of private health insurance, including by developing categories of health insurance policies, for example labelled gold, silver and bronze so that “consumers know what they are, and are not, covered for”.

The improvements would “weed out junk policies by ensuring consumers have access to a product with a mandated minimum level of cover” and develop standard definitions for medical procedures across all insurers to make it easier for people to compare policies.

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“Making it easier for consumers to shop around will increase competition in the private health sector and, in turn, improve value for money and affordability for consumers,” she said.

The ALP hospitals policy follows Labor promises to unfreeze the Medicare rebate, costing \$2.4 billion over four years, and not to lift prescription charges beyond the regular indexation, costing nearly \$1 billion over the forward estimates. While Labor also gave decade-long costings for these policies, it did not do so for the hospitals policy.

Asked for the ten-year cost Shorten said that in the next four years there would be a new agreement negotiated with the states. “We’re also optimistic that if elected, our reforms are going to make a genuine improvement to the bottom line of our hospital costs and we’ll see better outcomes for patients within the next four years.”

The Coalition has promised an extra \$2.9 billion for hospitals over the budget period.

Malcolm Turnbull contrasted Labor’s relatively modest hospitals promise with its condemnation of the Coalition over cuts.

Bill Shorten had said the Coalition had cut \$57 billion – even though the \$57 billion was never there, Turnbull said. Now Shorten promised \$2 billion, he said.

The \$57 billion refers to the amount that the 2014 budget proposed to cut from projected hospital funding over a decade.

“This is the schoolkids bonus all over again,” Turnbull said. “Labor campaigns for years and years on promises and claims they are going to provide additional funding or reverse savings measures that we have made and then, having milked ... the political benefit of that to the nth degree, then they come back and say we’re not going to do that – we are going to put in, in this case, \$2 billion more.”

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Shorten said that Labor could not replace every dollar the Liberals had taken out of the system.

The Consumers Health Forum urged the government to consider matching Labor's commitment to disqualify alternative therapies from eligibility for the health insurance rebate. Labor said on Friday it would exclude these therapies from the rebate as part of its new list of savings measures.

But Turnbull said private health insurance had to be "consumer-centred ... customer-focused, so that people are getting the insurance for the services and the therapies that they need, and that they believe will give them value".

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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