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Call to protect patients' rights in public hospitals

A significant jump in public hospitals targeting vulnerable patients in emergency departments to sign over their private health insurance is further evidence action must be taken to protect the rights of patients, says Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) CEO Mr Michael Roff.

New data from the Independent Hospital Pricing Authority (IHPA) released today as part of Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt's [consultation paper](#) on privately insured patients in public hospitals, shows the number of private patients admitted through emergency departments increased by 38 percent between 2012-13 and 2015-16. Mr Roff said this practice is unacceptable.

"The focus of staff in public hospital emergency departments should be on the clinical care of patients, not exploiting people in a vulnerable state to try and maximise revenue," he said.

Mr Roff welcomed Health Minister Greg Hunt's move to seek public consultation on this issue, which is a concern for all Australians.

"Obviously the State governments want to protect the income they are deriving from private patients in their public hospitals and are resisting engaging in this discussion. They are content to see public hospitals become privatised by stealth.

"Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data released in May showed the median wait time for elective surgery was twice as long for public patients – 42 days compared to 20 days for those who handed over their private health insurance benefits," he said.

Mr Roff said the Minister's consultation document puts forward a number of good options for Australians to consider that will address this issue.

"It is unlikely that any one option would be sufficient to stop the runaway growth of private in public. Rather a combination of measures will be needed to ensure public hospitals cannot continue to game the system to the detriment of public patients," he said.

Mr Roff said one option not explored in the Minister's paper is to strengthen the rules protecting patients' rights when they choose to use their private health insurance.

"The existing rules fail to protect consumers in a number of ways and these could easily be changed. There should be sanctions if hospitals continually pester patients after they initially refuse election, if they don't tell them about potential costs or don't let them know they could be transferred to a private hospital.

"For many patients being able to choose their doctor is an incentive to have and use their private health insurance, in any setting. A recent APHA consumer survey showed 60 percent of people who were treated as private patients in the public system were not able to choose their doctor, so many patients are being sold a lie.

"This continued rorting of private health insurance benefits by the public system is having a detrimental impact on health care in Australia. It is making those without insurance wait longer for care and it is forcing up premium prices – for everyone with health insurance.

"It's a failure of the system as public hospitals are allowed to choose cash over patient care – deliberately adding to waiting lists for public patients. I applaud the Health Minister for taking action on this issue, something must be done to ensure we have a health system all Australians can rely on into the future," Mr Roff said.

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