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Australians value access to private hospitals

Australians continue to take advantage of high quality private hospital care, as patient admissions grow, despite private health insurance participation dropping.

The first quarter of 2019 shows an increase in patients accessing private hospitals, up by more than 70,000 in the year, according to the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) data released today.

Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) CEO Michael Roff said Australians value the care they receive in the private system, illustrated by patient admissions increasing continuously for 20 years.

“The ability to choose when and where you have your surgery, choose which doctor performs the procedure and have access to a private room makes private hospital care a priority for many.”

Mr Roff said it was unfortunate that private health insurance participation numbers continued to decline, with hospital cover at 44.5 percent – down 0.1 percentage points over the quarter.

However, he hoped Federal Government moves to improve clarity and comparability around insurance would see those numbers pick up again.

Mr Roff said addressing the number of privately insured patients treated in public hospitals was essential, particularly as the APRA data continued to show that Australians with private health insurance want to be treated in private hospitals when given the choice.

“The first priority for the next Health Minister is to finalise a Heads of Agreement with the states. Hopefully, the two recalcitrant states that have not yet signed the Heads of Agreement, New South Wales and Victoria, will now come to the party so the process can move forward.

“The Heads of Agreement includes a framework for addressing the issue of public hospitals ‘harvesting’ private patients, particularly in emergency departments.”

Mr Roff cautioned that with the introduction of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Basic, health insurance categories being rolled out, members should exercise special care to ensure their health insurance will cover them for the services they may need.

“Only ‘Gold’ products will cover everything, so people should be extremely cautious about the low-cost, low-value products in the bottom categories to avoid the shock of not being properly covered,” he said.

Mr Roff encouraged Australians to get in touch with their insurer to understand any changes that might have impacted their policy from Monday 1 April 2019, and to get an update on what their policy covers.

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Media contact: Frith Rayner, Director Communications and Marketing, 0413 971 999

The Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) is the peak industry body representing the private hospital and day surgery sector. The private hospital sector treats 3.69 million patients a year, including treatment of more than a third of chemotherapy, 60 percent of all surgery, 74 percent of all elective musculoskeletal surgery and 79 percent of rehabilitation.