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The new rebate for non-complicated cataract surgery is about 416 Australian dollars, according to the Australian Department of Health & Ageing. The revised rebate took effect Nov. 1, 2009.

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patients more and [for] many of them will cross the line from being affordable to non-affordable," Noel A. Alpines, FRACO, FRCOphth, FACS, OSN Asia-Pacific Edition Board Member, said.

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ganized ophthalmology, and he disputed government claims that ophthalmologists overcharge their patients.

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Australian ophthalmologists oppose cut in Medicare rebate for cataract surgery

One practitioner says rural and indigenous patients will be forced to seek treatment at public hospitals in urban areas, causing a sharp increase in waiting times.

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"The bottom line is that it's going to cost the patients more and [for] many of them will cross the line from being affordable to non-affordable," Noel A. Alpines, FRACO, FRCOphth, FACS,

OSN Asia-Pacific Edition Board Member, said in a telephone interview with OCULAR SURGERY NEWS.

Michael A. Lawless, MD, OSN Asia-Pacific Edition Associate Editor, said the rebate cut was made without consulting organized ophthalmology, and he disputed government claims that ophthalmologists overcharge their patients.

"The decision by the Australian government to halve the Medicare rebate for patients who need cataract surgery is appalling and ill-thought out," Dr. Lawless said in an e-mail interview with OSN. "No consultation occurred with organized ophthalmology or, indeed, even with other interest groups."

The rebate for cataract surgery was

cut by 40% in 1987 and by another 33% in 1996, Dr. Alpines said.

"Medicare came up with a fee back when it first started in the early '80s, and it was subsequently adjusted for inflation in order to keep a ceiling on it," he said. "It was a fair and reasonable set of fees at that time put up many years ago, but it's no longer realistic. It's been interfered with by the political process and the financial restrictions imposed by several governments' budgetary constraints."

Duration of cataract surgery

Additionally, the Australian government is increasing the Medicare rebate for complex cataract surgery taking 40 minutes or longer to 850.75 Australian dollars.

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) termed the rebate increase "a mirage" because it will ben-



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efit a minority of cataract patients. Many Australians will still be adversely affected by the rebate reduction for non-complicated cataract surgery,

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the AMA said in a press release.

Most uncomplicated cataract procedures take 15 to 20 minutes, Australia's Department of Health & Ageing said in a separate press release.

"Advances in techniques and technology have resulted in a number of medical procedures being able to be performed much more quickly, safely and effectively," according to the Department of Health & Ageing release.

A survey of 334 ophthalmologists refuted the government's figures, the AMA said in a separate release.

The survey showed that 27% of cataract procedures take 20 minutes or less, and that 6% take 15 minutes or less. Conversely, 72% of cataract procedures take more than 20 minutes, the survey said.

The government's estimation does not account for surgical preparation time, Dr. Alpines said.

"When they say the operation takes 15 minutes, they disregard the fact that there's a change-over time and it takes another 15 minutes to get ready for the next operation," he said.

Impact on access to treatment

According to the Rural Doctors Association of Australia, the rebate cut will make cataract surgery unaffordable for many rural and indigenous Australians. Many rural patients will be forced to travel to the cities for treatment at public hospitals, and the increased demand for treatment will

increase wait times, Dr. Alpines said.

"This is completely contrary to the stated aims of reducing waiting lists because it's actually going to increase waiting lists hugely," he said.

The cut will also force many urban ophthalmologists to stop offering cat-



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aract services in rural areas, Dr. Lawless said.

"The surgeons will be taking a 50% cut in what they were previously getting, and they were doing this out of a sense of community responsibility anyway," Dr. Lawless said. "It is not as if they were making substantial money. This is an insult and is very disheartening to those surgeons who are contributing to Australian society by performing surgery in remote and rural areas."

Dr. Alpines said the Blue Mountains Eye Study, a large study of an Australian population, showed a clear connection between low vision and mortality. The Australian government ignored study results when cutting the rebate for cataract surgery, he said.

"It's flying in the face of what the research shows, which is that the worse people see, the more of them are going to die," Dr. Alpines said. "It's just amazing to me how they can completely ignore that kind of superb research and go on completely unfettered in their response."

— by Matt Hasson

OSN

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