



Speech by

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### **BULK-BILLING, MEDICARE**

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algester—ALP) (11.20 p.m.): Prime Minister John Howard has led pensioners to believe that bulk-billing for GP visits would be available for them. Mr Charlie Gilbert and his wife in my local area of Acacia Ridge were stunned this week by a letter from their GP stating—

As of the 1st September we will cease bulk-billing of pensioners and institute a reduced fee instead ... A standard consultation ... will cost \$35 ... a long consultation will cost \$58.

The Gilberts have been attending the same GP practice for 30 years. They are shocked as they will have great difficulty paying these costs.

The Gilberts and other residents in my local area are to be congratulated for getting behind the campaign to save Medicare. More than 850 signatures were collected on a petition I set up asking the federal government to adequately fund bulk-billing and to save Medicare. People who signed the petition all had a story to tell about their distress at not finding a GP who will bulk-bill. They had stories to tell about the high costs of health care or long waits at the public hospitals because they could not afford to pay a GP consultation fee. The great thing about their willingness to sign the petition is that they are not wanting to sit back and let Medicare—a system that has served them well for two decades—be destroyed by the Howard government. They are prepared to stand up and fight for it.

The number of people wanting to sign the petitions has been phenomenal, and I am not surprised by that. Finding a doctor who bulk-bills is harder than ever. In the outer southern suburbs of Brisbane the number of GPs who bulk-bill has dropped more than 20 per cent over the past couple of years. Acacia Ridge currently has a doctor to patient ratio of 1,700 to one, while the QEII Hospital is overflowing with patients who should be able to be treated by their local GP. The other worrying fact about Acacia Ridge is that 30 per cent of people in Acacia Ridge earn less than \$200 a week. They are people who cannot afford to pay \$38 or \$58 for a GP consultation.

John Howard just does not seem to understand this. He seems to think that people can pay their own way. But it is obvious to most people to whom I talk that our health care system is ailing and that John Howard has forced a health care agreement down Queenslanders' throats that will deliver \$160 million less to our hospitals while he continues to neglect Medicare. Most people are forced to go to the public hospitals, and this is a situation that the state government cannot continue to sustain.

I thank all those people who signed the petition. I am hopeful that its implementation in federal parliament this week will see some action. I hope that John Howard will take heed of the message that is coming loud and clear from Queensland and from all around Australia that people want to save Medicare; they want to restore bulk-billing.