

# Communicating with Staff

Transitioning a practice away from bulk billing to a fee-based model is a very challenging task. Do not underestimate the impact it will have on your administrative and reception / front desk staff. It can be a difficult and sometimes awkward process and will require strong leadership skills from practice owners to be successful.

It will also require a huge change in the way we think about fees and fee-setting. Currently, we all tend to default to the position of, "Is there a fee for that?" Which, interpreted, means: "Is there a Medicare billable item number for that?" Place value on yourself and your staff.

A complete team mindset change is required. Indeed, it should be irrelevant to our fee structure if there is a government-determined rebate for any of the services we deliver. Our thinking needs to embrace the idea that if we, as a practice team, deliver a relevant, patient-centred, health needs-motivated service then we are entitled to charge a fee for that service. Some services may trigger a rebate, some may not.

Having made this enormous leap in the approach to setting our fees, the secret to any success will be an effective approach whereby practitioners and staff alike are wholly committed to the concept.

Your administrative and front desk staff are in the firing line and will bear the brunt of any patient frustration and possible anger from the patients. They will also be your best assets in the application of the process, they are crucial to the success of the process. In short, their contributions will determine the level of success achieved.

**With this in mind, the best advice is to take the team on the journey with you:**

- Make sure your staff understands the reasons behind your decisions – don't be afraid to share

the facts of the financial situation. Clearly define the practice strategy and approach to reviewing fees.

- Schedule whole of team meetings and seek input.
- Develop the fee setting goals together and make them achievable. For example, small incremental increases will probably be more palatable to patients than significant hikes.
- Consider a tiered fee structure. Educate your staff so they are comfortable and confident in understanding its application (and where and when each tier applies).
- Have clear timelines for achieving the determined goals and meet regularly to discuss with the team the achievements as well as the failures. Examine the reasons why the targets may not have been met, as well as what worked and what didn't. Front desk staff will have an invaluable contribution to make.
- Most importantly, ensure consistency of approach and act as a team. If a decision is made to charge a fee for service then make sure everyone bills consistently and sticks to it - patients have a knack of seeking out the "chink in the armour", whether it be a medical colleague or staff member.
- Empower your staff to implement the changes and support them when it gets difficult. Have a protocol to follow if they are dealing with patient complaints (it may be that the doctor joins the conversation to help explain practice decisions and support the staff member).
- Ensure consistency and a whole of team approach by developing "standard responses" for the staff to use in a given situation. Give them the words / scripts to use, so everyone is on the same platform and patients are not receiving mixed messages.

**No one must break rank!**