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SHADOW MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND MEDICARE
MEMBER FOR BALLARAT**

ADDRESS TO THE PHARMACY GUILD

GOLD COAST

THURSDAY, 7 MARCH 2019

******CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY******

It's good to be back at APP once again, for my third visit as Shadow Health Minister.

I said at last year's conference that I hoped the next time I joined you it would be in a different capacity. Well it hasn't quite worked out that way because of the timing of this conference and the timing of the election – so next year perhaps.

But as you all know we're at the pointy end of the electoral cycle now - we're only a little over two months from election day.

It's going to be hard-fought as all our federal elections are.

And clearly – despite the difficulties of winning from opposition – Labor will be competitive.

In my National Press Club address a few weeks ago I made it clear that just like at the last election, health will be a major issue in this campaign too.

We will make sure it is because for Labor, delivering better health care is core business.

We have no higher priority than delivering on our vision of a truly universal health system in which every Australian can get timely and affordable access to the world-class health they need whenever they need it.

Pharmacists play an important role in that vision.

As I hope you all know from our productive discussions over the five and a half years, Labor genuinely values the important role that pharmacists play in the supply of medicines and the health of all Australians.

This is reflected in our new National Platform – our most important policy document – which we finalised just a few months ago.

Our platform now recognises that “the National Medicines Policy and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme are underpinned by the community pharmacy network and pharmacists, who are medicines experts”.

This is a significant development.

It's the first time our platform has been explicit about the importance of pharmacists and community pharmacies.

Again, this is Labor's most important policy document.

It sets out the principles by which we would govern, and forms the basis for the more detailed policy-making we do when we're in government.

I'm very pleased with this addition and I hope you are too.

So how will this acknowledgement in our Platform actually manifest in a Shorten Labor Government?

Well today I am releasing a pre-election letter to the Guild in which Bill Shorten and I formally reiterate Labor's strong support for community pharmacy.

This letter I hope will give your sector some certainty as we go into this campaign as it puts into writing assurances around some key issues I know you're concerned about.

Foremost among those issues is the upcoming expiry of the 6th Community Pharmacy Agreement in June 2020.

The letter formally commits that a Shorten Labor Government will honour the 6CPA and lead early and inclusive negotiations towards the next agreement.

I want to welcome the Minister's announcement on the AHI today. We'll look at the details in the Budget, but in principle we'll support that in the Parliament – and honour it if we form Government.

Just as importantly, our letter makes it clear we will honour the agreement we

make. As the Guild has said of its disputes with the current Government, that is a matter of trust.

One challenge the next agreement will need to consider is the ongoing affordability of medicines.

Labor believes medicines must remain affordable and accessible for all Australians.

After all, Labor created the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), which along with Medicare is a key pillar of Australia's universal health system that Labor will always protect.

But official Government data shows that one in 14 people delays or avoids filling scripts due to cost – meaning that hundreds of thousands of Australians don't visit pharmacies or take the medicines their doctors have recommended.

We were deeply concerned by the current Government's proposal to make this worse by increasing PBS co-payments by up to \$5 – even for pensioners.

We also understand the view that the optional \$1 discount, which the current Government introduced in 2016, has not improved the affordability of medicines for most Australians.

Today I'm committing that if we win government in May we will consider ways to improve the affordability of medicines in the context of the next agreement.

We will work with pharmacists and the medicines sector to improve access to medicines on the PBS and the National Immunisation Program, reducing the unnecessary delays and withdrawals we've seen under this Government

We will also work with you to address other barriers to access, such as the difficulty of attracting and retaining pharmacists in some parts of Australia.

The next agreement will also need to consider the role of pharmacists in primary health care reform. Labor shares the Guild's belief that pharmacists should work to their full scope of practice, without fragmenting care or duplicating services.

This belief is also reflected in our National Platform, which recognises that "primary care innovation should include better utilisation of [the pharmacy] infrastructure and workforce", and commits a Labor Government to "encouraging opportunities and funding systems [for] GPs, community pharmacies and other primary care providers to collaborate".

In my Press Club speech last month I also announce a Shorten Labor Government will establish a permanent Australian Health Reform Commission.

This will be a powerful, independent body charged with helping us develop and ambitious, long-term reform agenda that transcends our electoral cycle.

I also announced that one of its first priorities will be primary care reform.

This is something we've been talking about for decades but now is the time to get cracking. With an older and sicker population, we can't afford to waste any more time.

We know there is considerable evidence that countries with more accessible primary care achieve better and more equitable health outcomes – and at a much lower cost - than those countries with a higher focus on acute care. Detecting and treating illness earlier improves patient outcomes and avoids the need for more expensive treatments.

That is why a Shorten Labor Government will have a strong focus on primary health care and preventive health measures.

Community pharmacy is obviously an important part of this and I look forward to working with the Guild in this area.

Your scope of practice has already expanded into services that are also provided by other professions.

But as you have heard me say many times before, I think the greater opportunity is in services that aren't provided now, or aren't provided consistently enough. If community pharmacies can identify and address gaps in our primary health care system – and contribute to system integration – you will serve patients more and better.

Our letter to the Guild also makes completely clear that Labor supports the current system of community pharmacy – including the Location Rules, which we voted to make permanent in 2018.

It also notes that states and territories play an important role in the regulation of medicines in Australia. That's a feature of our federation and provides opportunities for state-based innovation and local policy responses.

But we also understand that federalism can lead to a patchwork of laws and inconsistencies for patients and pharmacists.

That's why today I'm pleased to announce that a Shorten Labor Government will ask the COAG Health Council to consider whether it is possible and desirable to harmonise state laws and programs on the supply of medicines and vaccines, Opioid Dependence Treatment and continuity of supply after natural disasters.

Finally, the letter also points out that Labor has a pharmacist in our parliamentary Caucus. If I am lucky enough to become Health Minister in a couple of months' time, I will continue to draw on the experience and expertise of the Member for Dobell – Emma McBride – as we consider these and other issues affecting your sector.

I want to take this opportunity too to assure you that Labor remains committed to the digital health agenda.

We had deep concerns about the way this Government managed the rollout of the My Health Record over the last year.

But we do know that the My Health Record – and other digital innovations which are for example changing the way you dispense and monitor medicines – has the real potential to avoid mistakes and save lives.

It's important we get these things right, so that the public has trust and confidence in them – and we believe this trust was severely undermined by the botched rollout.

Labor led the charge last year on making improvements to the system in a bid to restore some of that trust.

We still have a ways to go but I want to assure you today Labor is committed to building on what we have and delivering a strong, functional e-health system that has all the privacy and security safeguards necessary to ensure the Australian people actually want to be active participants in this digital health care revolution.

So thank you again for the opportunity to reiterate my support today for Australia's 5,700 community pharmacies.

Labor have been grateful for the close relationship we've had with pharmacists and the Guild during our years in Opposition.

The Guild remains a strong and trusted voice for community pharmacies in Canberra.

In my nearly six years as Shadow Health Minister I've been in constant contact with the Guild, both federally and at the state level.

And that's not to mention the many Guild members I've met in my travels around the country.

We don't always agree, but we always listen and we always appreciate your professionalism and your passionate advocacy.

We hope to continue and build on that close relationship if we win Government.

Thank you.

ENDS

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