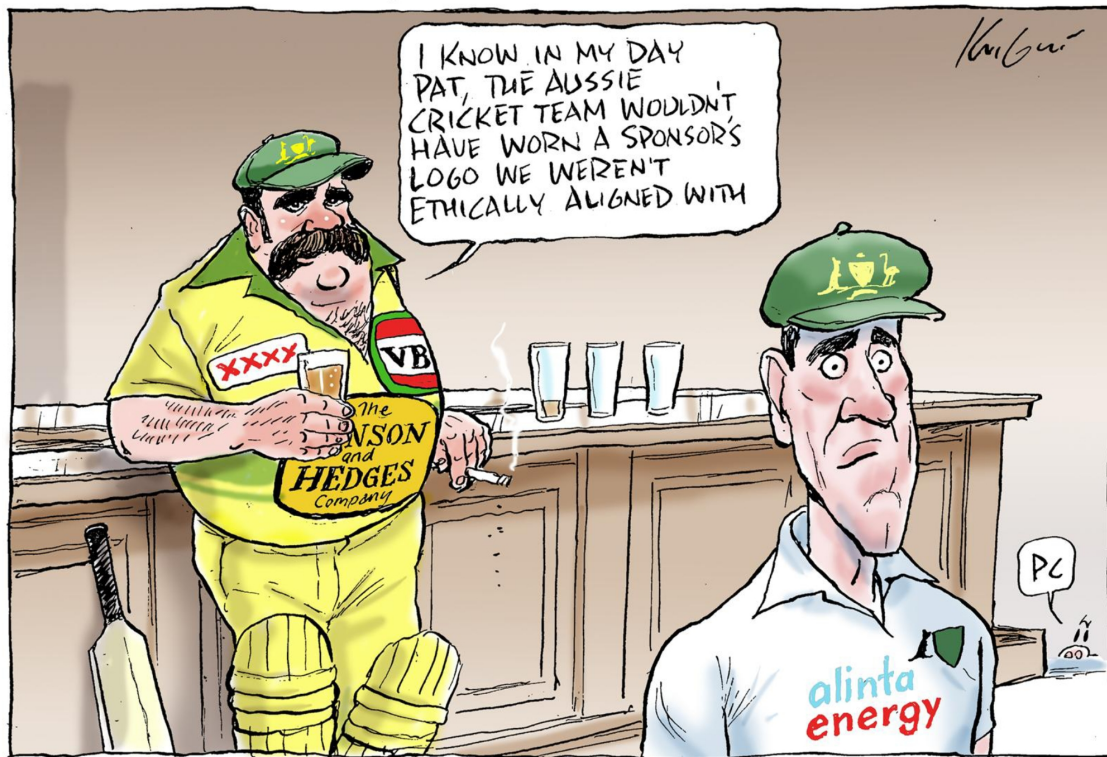


# MARK KNIGHT

Hand-signed Knight cartoons are available for purchase from [knightcartoons.com.au](http://knightcartoons.com.au)



## Making tax dollars work



**MARK MELVIN**

**Y**ou'd be right to be concerned, as I am, that Victoria has accumulated the highest public debt of all the states across Australia.

Paying off that debt is a cost to be borne by our kids and their kids, for generations. As interest rates climb, it is harder to service debt, just like it is for homeowners. Governments are not immune.

At the same time, our government must continue to maintain essential services and infrastructure. This will most likely require even more borrowing, with more taxes imposed on businesses and individuals already struggling.

With stakes so high, taxpayers need to know that infrastructure spending is directed to the right places, at the right time.

As we head into the Victorian state election in November, we must ask the incoming government to take a realistic view of the current economic landscape.

Who could have imagined, when Melbourne was booming and had the highest net immigration across the country, that it would be drastically reversed?

With a Covid pandemic, bushfires, floods, a war in Ukraine and skills shortages, circumstances have changed. People's habits have also changed. Many people now work from home at least some of the time. There has been a rise in the use of technology. All of this has lasting impacts on travel patterns and how we buy products and services. It affects freight, transport, housing and the digital world. The huge increase in levels of online shopping, for example, requires a rethink about freight. Melbourne's logistics demand is growing much faster than Sydney's and most of our global peer cities.

Infrastructure Victoria's 30-year strategy also tells us the Melbourne Metro 2 could open the west and provide a transport link to Fisherman's Bend. This could be considered among the options as a timely investment, getting people travelling to areas of competitive advantage.

In the face of the surge of technology usage during Covid, our Benchmarking report shows that digital connectivity and take-up can be improved. The report also shows that Melbourne is the sixth most unaffordable housing market in the English-speaking world.

An incoming government therefore needs to be bold and rethink its infrastructure spend.

Infrastructure Victoria has been set up to help with decision-making. Let's put all current and future infrastructure spending under review to invest in the most productive outcomes for a prosperous future for us all.

**MARK MELVIN IS THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF COMMITTEE FOR MELBOURNE**

# Crook system really needs a check-up

**D**OCTORS are up in arms this week over reports that an estimated \$8bn a year is being siphoned from Medicare by doctors charging for services they did not deliver, or over-servicing patients.

The claim isn't that there's \$8bn in fraud in the classic sense of the word but that patients are being charged for services they never had or services were recorded as having taken longer than they did to attract a higher Medicare fee.

It's based on the work of Dr Margaret Faux, who recently completed a PhD into Medicare claiming and compliance.

She also runs a private business, Synapse Medical Services, that processes Medicare bills for doctors, hospitals and corporate medical practices and that's prompted counterclaims that the debate is also being driven by other agendas.

"The bottom line is we don't know exactly how much is fraud, deliberate abuse and how much is errors, but it actually doesn't matter. Whether it's deliberate or unintentional, it has to stop," she said. "I think most Australians believe doctors are honest people. But ... anywhere where you've got a huge pot of money that is super easy to access, you are going to get bad actors building business models just taking the money unlawfully."

Now the idea of 30 per cent of billed Medicare services involving something that involves fraud or overcharging sounds like a lot.

Health Minister Mark Butler has announced an inquiry into the



**SAMANTHA MAIDEN**

claims, which sounds like a sensible approach. More data is needed.

But not, it seems according to some doctors. Some argue they need more "time" to treat patients and increased Medicare rebates. Which is a polite way of saying they want to be paid more to do less. Which is fine, just be honest about it.

Some have spoken about how hard they work, which is no doubt true. But their patients who are childcare workers, cleaners, and police work hard too. They just don't get paid as much.

Based on recent salary surveys, a full-time general practitioner on average earns between \$200,000 and \$350,000 a year.

The Australian Medical Association President Dr Steve Robson took to social media posting messages from doctors who claimed they were going to quit. "Good job, 7:30 report," he complained.

This was offered above a screenshot of another GP who claimed "many GPs are sending me DMs like this in the last 24 hours."

"I'm done with all the abuse and the politics. Gonna go back into hospital work. Good luck," the mystery GP said in the texts.

"In my clinic another four GPs

decided to do the same after that awful ... report. Good luck folks, the dark ages are coming."

So there you go, it turns out that at some GP clinic, four trained doctors watched the same news story on Monday and they all marched into work the next morning and quit their jobs.

Sounds legit. The GP text was sent at 11:33am so that's some wild developments at the GP clinic that morning all from a single report on alleged Medicare rorts.

Who knew that doctors were so sensitive to criticism of how some – not all – doctors are overcharging, that they are making life-changing decisions from a single episode of a current affairs program?

Or, the absolute coincidence that they were all watching the story on the same night?

Crazy stuff. But it's a serious issue, because as the mystery texter explained – or threatened – if we don't do what the doctors say we are entering "the dark ages."

Now, don't get me wrong, of course doctors have been on the frontline of the Covid response.

Nobody is suggesting there are not many, many doctors doing the right thing or that they work hard.

Or that they don't have significant overheads in running a business, with medical indemnity insurance, paying staff and other costs.

And nobody is suggesting after years of Medicare freezes the area might not be ripe for review.

But what really annoys me is the tantrums from some doctors whenever they are questioned.

It's the complete toys-out-of-the-cart-catastrophe every, single, time.

The notion that just because a single media report criticises your profession you will quit your job and threaten to send patients to "the dark ages" is preposterous.

This is emotional blackmail. It's like if you asked your husband to put out the bins and he declared, "That's it, That's it! We're getting a divorce!"

If anyone did that you would think they were a massive weirdo and frankly, that assessment is the 100 per cent correct response.

Forgive me for being a little annoyed that the mildest criticism when doctors' billing practices are questioned is met with threats to quit and send patients to the "dark ages."

These doctors need to get a grip. We've all been to doctor and been charged \$70 for a five-minute consultation, or for a long consult when the actual face-to-face time isn't long. Or being asked to "pick one ailment" during a consult and told to come back a second time.

And in a refreshing twist, some doctors say this should be looked at. Former deputy chief medical officer Dr Nick Coatsworth suggests there are problems in the system that need to be addressed.

He claims it's a simple matter for doctors to defraud the system.

Hallelujah. It's time for doctors to engage constructively with the issue and not shoot the messenger or get out a tiny violin.

**SAMANTHA MAIDEN IS NATIONAL POLITICAL EDITOR AT NEWS.COM.AU**