

Healthcare

Socialist Alliance stands for the right of working people and the poor to universal, free, quality health care.

The Socialist Alliance bases its policy on health promotion, disease prevention and timely treatment of illnesses and includes promoting good health. It aims to encourage a healthy community in a healthy environment and reduce health risks. Health includes the physical, mental and social well being of the community. It is a resource used by individuals on a daily basis.

A healthy life depends on a healthy environment, safe working conditions and enabling people to increase control over this improvement process. It will be based on the concept of hope and community control.

But access to healthcare is progressively being removed from the poor, and many so-called "high-paid" workers. The public health system is failing, and many in rural and outer metropolitan areas have limited access to even basic general practice medicine. Hospital waiting lists are overcrowded, with too many nights where emergency wards are on ambulance bypass. Meanwhile the private health system benefits from billions of dollars in direct and indirect government subsidies, on top of the semi-compulsory private health insurance rip-off, where working people who can "afford" it pay huge premiums for little return. Where the public system, even in its damaged state, is relatively efficient, the private sector is a black hole for money, with little useful health outcome. Funding to public hospitals, Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme are all under threat.

The Socialist Alliance will restore and extend Medicare

The Socialist Alliance endorses the principle of universal health insurance that underlies Medicare, and emphasises that Medicare is not just a "safety net". If Australia is to have comprehensive universal health insurance, paid for by progressive taxation and ensuring equitable access to health care for all, there is no need to have private health insurance. Currently, private health insurance is massively subsidised by the Australian government, and it contributes little to total health expenditure. By abolishing the tax rebate for private health insurance, \$2.5 billion could be freed to provide more resources for public hospitals.

Private health insurance encourages a two-tier health system. The Socialist Alliance would phase out private health insurance so that all Australians would have the same level of health insurance and the same access to health care.

The coverage of Medicare would be extended to include dental care and appropriate ancillary services such as physiotherapy and psychological counselling as well as dental, aged care, prosthetics, rehabilitation, alternative therapies, dental, optometry, speech, dietetics, auditory and preventative services. The Medicare rebate paid to doctors would be increased to an appropriate level, to ensure that doctors receive adequate remuneration for bulk-billing. However, rather than a flat tax, currently 1.5% of taxable income, the levy should be a progressive tax, like income tax, where the percentage of taxable income which would constitute the Medicare levy would increase with increasing income.

The Socialist Alliance would make multi-disciplinary community primary health care services the cornerstone of the health system

The Socialist Alliance would ensure the availability of adequate funding for Community Health Centres (CHC) providing comprehensive primary health care, focussing initially on areas of

greatest need. Funding would be made available to general practitioners working in poorer areas to convert their practices to community health centres, with the doctors and other health professionals working in salaried positions within the public service.

Democratic joint committees of medical professionals, other health workers and members of the community will be established to coordinate the CHCs. The community will be fully involved in the process of establishing and administering the CHCs.

The Socialist Alliance will establish Women's Health Centres providing access to contraception, abortion and cancer screening facilities.

The Socialist Alliance would ensure that essential pharmaceuticals are available according to need

The Socialist Alliance would retain the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, and legislate to ensure that it is quarantined from any trade agreement and any undue influence of pharmaceutical companies. The Commonwealth Serum Laboratories would be re-nationalised, and given the specific task of producing cheap generic drugs.

The Socialist Alliance will lobby in international forums to overturn the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement, which maximises pharmaceutical company profits by allowing 20-year patents, whilst denying millions of people access to life-saving drugs.

The Socialist Alliance will ensure that mental health services are adequately funded

The prevalence of mental health issues is well known in the community, and it is predicted that depression will become the major cause of morbidity in the next decades. There is also a stigma attached to these conditions. Major primary intervention strategies, education and service networks will be established at workplaces, schools, and within communities to tackle these issues.

Counselling, psychological and psychiatric services will be made available free of charge in CHCs.

Facilities will be established to assist the reversing of the prevalence of the current trend especially towards wide-scale depression. It is the view of the Socialist Alliance, however, that the predicted increased prevalence of depression is related to the effects of neo-liberal economic policies, and it can be expected that implementation of a broad range of Socialist Alliance policies will help to reduce the prevalence of depression.

The Socialist Alliance will legislate to protect the right of access to free, quality mental health care, without pressure to conform to traditional gender roles or other social stereotypes.

The Socialist Alliance will ensure that funding and structuring of health services emphasise prevention and equity

Prevention of ill health will be primary in our policies. The promotion of healthy living styles will be promoted by special campaigns.

Schools will be funded to promote healthy eating and providing healthy food for children by establishing a free lunch time meal program in all schools.

Strategies for reduction of stress levels and accidents at work places will be formulated.

Free, quality health education and screening programs will be fully funded.

The prevention of ill health will reduce the cost of treatment in the long run. The inclusion of the community in the decision-making processes will also assist in this process. The fact that the community and individuals take responsibility for their health will boost the type of healthy community we envisage.

The costs of health policies will be achieved by, amongst other things, abolishing government subsidies for private health insurance, and by a major reduction in the defence budget.

Complementary and alternative medicine

The Socialist Alliance recognises that complementary and alternative therapies, if properly regulated, can play an important role in a democratically-run, community based health system that focuses on prevention and education.

The Socialist Alliance will: increase provision in public institutions of education and training in complementary and alternative therapies that are supported by independent research and evaluation; ensure that healthcare practitioners who advise or prescribe complementary or alternative medicines are appropriately trained and competent; extend Medicare to cover the services of such practitioners; employ such practitioners as appropriate in public hospitals and Community Health Centres; increase public research and evaluation of complementary and alternative medicines; regulate and where appropriate nationalise the supply of complementary and alternative medicines to ensure they meet the required standards of safety, quality and efficacy.

The Socialist Alliance will ensure that patients' rights are respected

The Socialist Alliance will guarantee patients' control by legislating the right of access to all information required for informed consent; the right to appoint a legal guardian of a patient's choice; the right to choose or refuse medical treatment; the right to choose contraception appropriate to the patient and abortion as required. Hospitals to be forced to admit their surgical, pharmacological and other nosocomial mistakes as a matter of due process.

A no-fault medical indemnity insurance system (similar to the system currently available in New Zealand) will be introduced which will ensure that patients are fully compensated for medical mishaps, without the necessity for adversarial court cases, whilst ensuring that patients can expect medical care of the highest possible quality. This indemnity will be extended to cover midwives providing care outside hospitals.

The Socialist Alliance will ensure that there is an adequate health workforce to meet the healthcare needs of all Australians

The Socialist Alliance will expand student positions in tertiary health education faculties to overcome the shortage of health workers in nursing, aged care and general practice, particularly in rural areas.

This policy was adopted by the May 2004 National Conference of the Socialist Alliance.