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GPs under pressure to cut costs and boost bookings



[Julie Lambert \(/author/julie-lambert\)](#) 30 April 2015



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NEARLY half of health professionals in a recent survey said they lost sleep over government plans to overhaul Medicare, and one in seven reported a drop in patients amid a media furore over the reforms.

The survey of 423 health professionals, including 214 GPs and 134 practice managers, also revealed a sense of mounting financial pressures but a surprisingly low take-up of new efficiency measures such as online bookings and automated reminders.

The survey was conducted by software vendor MedicalDirector in February, before the second version of the shelved GP co-payment was dumped.

More than 38% of respondents said they felt under pressure to cut costs and increase bookings, and 14% said bookings had already dropped.

The pressure was more acute among regional and rural practices than in the capital cities (43% compared with 34%), with 4% of all respondents saying they feared their business would become unviable unless they consolidated with another.

“I am worried that in order to keep financially viable, I would have to prioritise patients that can pay higher fees. I’d rather close my practice than get that low,” one rural GP with 11–20 years’ experience was quoted as saying in the survey report.

Younger doctors with 1–5 years’ experience were more likely to be worried (60%) than veterans of more than 21 years’ standing (32%).

Asked what kept them awake at night, nearly half the survey respondents (48%) said they were worried proposed changes to Medicare would have a bad effect on patients’ outcomes.

Despite the pressure to cut costs, however, only 17% used online booking systems – but more than 10% were planning to introduce online appointments with a year.

The survey report identified computer-based reminder systems as another area where practices can lift efficiency.

“Only 28% of respondents indicated they use an automated reminder system to notify patients of upcoming appointments,” it said. “However, of those who do, 70% found it reduced the number of no-shows and/or late patients.”

Rising postage costs might accelerate the shift to reminders via SMS or other electronic means, it said.

Unsurprisingly, given problems around the compatibility of electronic systems, it found many practices were still struggling with snail mail for patients' records and reminders, especially in the capital cities.

"Interestingly, 42% of respondents noted they still preferred to send records via post and fax, despite more than 70% thinking that sharing records electronically had the potential to either streamline work or accelerate the referral process for patients," the report said.

Almost half of the city-based practitioners (46%) favoured traditional means of sending paper records, whereas only a third of regional and rural respondents still used snail mail.

The survey drew on a mix of the software company's clients and other health professionals who responded to an advertised call for participants.

The report, Practice Pressures and E-health Realities, can be found at the MedicalDirector website, medicaldirector.com (<http://medicaldirector.com/>).

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Julie Lambert covers politics for Medical Observer, with special interests in public health, rural medicine, business, medico-legal matters and the environment. She was formerly chief sub-editor at Australian Associated Press and a business reporter and editor in Japan.

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