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WA leads the way in providing more money, less 'red tape' for country residents

Portfolio: Health, Regional Development

The State Government has announced a complete overhaul of the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) to increase support to country residents needing to travel away from their homes to access specialist medical services.

Health Minister Dr Kim Hames said the Government would provide an additional \$30.8million over three and a half years using funds from the Royalties for Regions Scheme.

“The commitment is a key plank of the State Government’s election promises for health,” he said.

“These changes will cut the red-tape previously associated with PATS, improve access to the scheme and increase support to patients.

“Country patients will no longer be required to make any up-front payment towards their travel and will receive an increase in the fuel and accommodation subsidies provided.”

Previously, eligible patients not covered by a concession card were required to contribute up to \$200 a year per family towards their trips. They were not eligible for an accommodation subsidy for the first three nights of the first four trips per 12-month period.

Under the improved scheme, all eligible country residents who have to travel more than 100 kilometres to access specialist medical treatment will receive the same subsidy regardless of their financial circumstances.

“More patients will benefit from new arrangements to subsidise the cost of an escort to accompany them during treatment, and cancer patients, in particular, will benefit from improved access to subsidised air travel,” Dr Hames said.

“Previously cancer patients had to travel more than 16 hours by road before they were eligible for air travel subsidies.

“Under the new scheme, this has significantly dropped to more than four hours and will make a big difference to patients needing to travel to access radiotherapy and chemotherapy services.”

Regional Development Minister Brendon Grylls said more than 50,000 trips were being subsidised under PATS each year.

“Patients who live in rural, regional and remote areas of Western Australia are entitled to have access to proper medical services and support,” he said.

“This is one of the reasons we pushed for the Royalties for Regions scheme to ensure that money was put back into assisting communities in regional WA, to access better health care and assistance.”

WA is the first State or Territory to act on the recommendations of a Senate Inquiry into the operation and effectiveness of PATS. From January 1, 2009 eligible patients will receive:

- an increase in the fuel subsidy of up to three cents to 16 cents per kilometre (the fuel subsidy will be reviewed on a six-monthly basis to reflect changes in fuel prices)
- an increase from \$35 per night to \$60 per night for patients travelling alone and \$75 per night for patients travelling with an approved escort and \$20 per night for private accommodation.

The following program enhancements would be applied from February 1, 2009:

- the removal of the patient contribution requirement
- residents of York and Northam will be able to access the full benefits of the scheme
- expanded eligibility for approval for an escort to allow for greater flexibility for aged and disabled patients and cancer patients
- cancer patients needing to travel more than four hours by road one way to access specialist medical treatment will be eligible for air travel subsidies
- cancer patients will be eligible for an accommodation subsidy for a recovery night following treatment
- the carer/escort accommodation allowance will be continued for the period a cancer patient is hospitalised away from home
- health professionals, other than general practitioners solely, will be able to authorise applications and paperwork simplifying the application and reimbursement process.

Mr Grylls said a new PATS database would be developed to allow a more efficient administrative system and the ability to plan for the future, based on the needs of country residents.

“This latest initiative further demonstrates the commitment of the Liberal-National Government to strengthening health services across country WA,” the Minister said.

Forms and brochures are being updated and education and training offered to country and metropolitan health staff, to ensure the smooth implementation of the changes to the scheme.

For further information about the new scheme, go to <http://www.wacountry.health.wa.gov.au>

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