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## Removal of the health rebate should be strongly resisted



**ROB BRANSBY**

Australians have a lot to be proud of beyond our beautiful beaches and wealth-creating natural resources. One thing we perhaps don't always appreciate is the world-class health-care system we've built up over the past 100 years.

Of course, that system is far from perfect — there is much work to be done to make it better. But having spent the last year or so looking at health systems in Europe, Asia and the Americas I can say without doubt that our system is the envy of the world. The one great strength of the Australian health-care system is the shared balance between the two core sectors that provide health care to Australians — public and private.

History shows that keeping our system in balance is critical to providing the best possible health care for everyone. We need a strong, well-resourced public system. But the public system alone cannot bear the health-care burden. That's why the role of the private health system is so critical. And it is going to become even more critical as Australia faces the reality of an

ageing population where our health care needs will soar.

Every day hundreds of West Australians make use of the private health insurance for life-transforming treatments for chronic illnesses such as cancer and heart disease. Every time they choose to use their health insurance in a private hospital it means a bed in a public hospital is freed up for others.

Underpinning the ability of Australians to choose private health cover was the introduction in the 1990s of the 30 per cent health insurance rebate — money the Federal Government pays to individuals and families with private cover to reduce the cost of their premiums. For older Australians for whom health care is critical, the rebate extends to 40 per cent at age 70. There is no question that without the rebate, thousands of West Australians simply would not be able to afford to maintain their private health insurance.

Before the introduction of the rebate we saw a steady and dangerous decline in the number of Australians with private health insurance. Unfortunately, it would

appear this balance is in great danger with some politicians suggesting the rebate should be reduced or even taken away. The Greens, for example, have said that they would remove the health insurance rebate and the current Government has begun moves to means-test the rebate system.

As a not-for-profit organisation, HBF will always be non-political — we respect the right of Australians to choose their leaders. But in the spirit of honesty and openness we would respectfully urge all Australians to consider the consequences of any government disturbing the balance of our health care system by removing the health insurance rebate.

So far we've heard little from our leaders on this critical topic. West Australians have a right to know where their election candidates stand on this issue. We believe it will determine the fate of our health care system that, despite its faults, continues to serve us well.

**Rob Bransby is managing director of health insurance fund HBF**