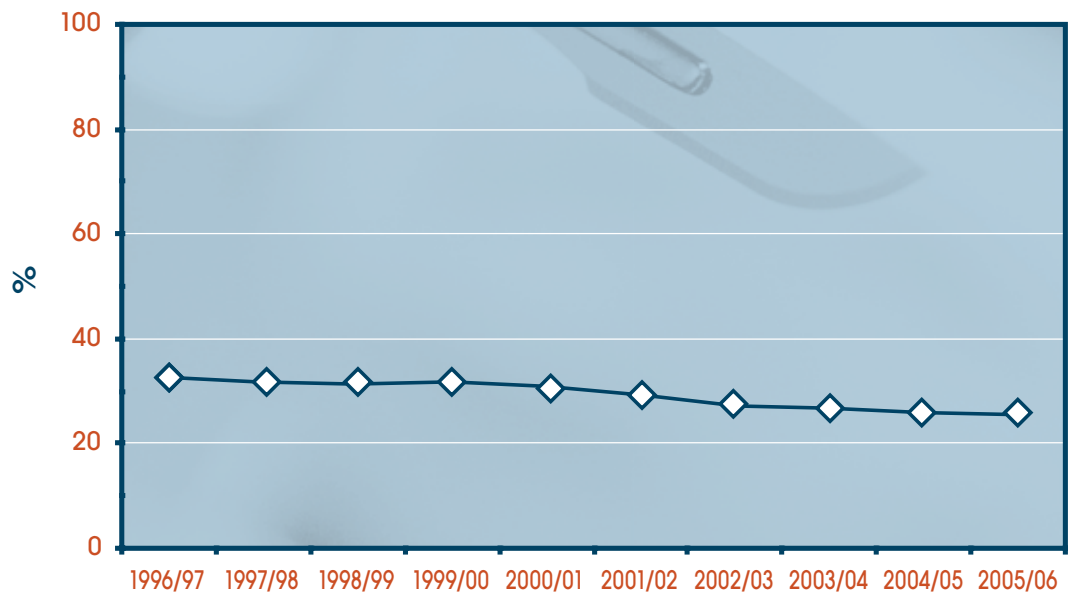


How much do we pay specialists?

Schedule fees for specialists are much higher than schedule fees for GPs. Despite this, only 26% of visits to specialists (excluding pathologists and radiologists) are bulkbilled.

The figure of 26% is much lower than the proportion of consultations which are bulkbilled by GPs (75.6%), pathologists (85.7%) and diagnostic radiologists (60.2%). Figure 9 shows that the bulkbilling rate is low and declining further.

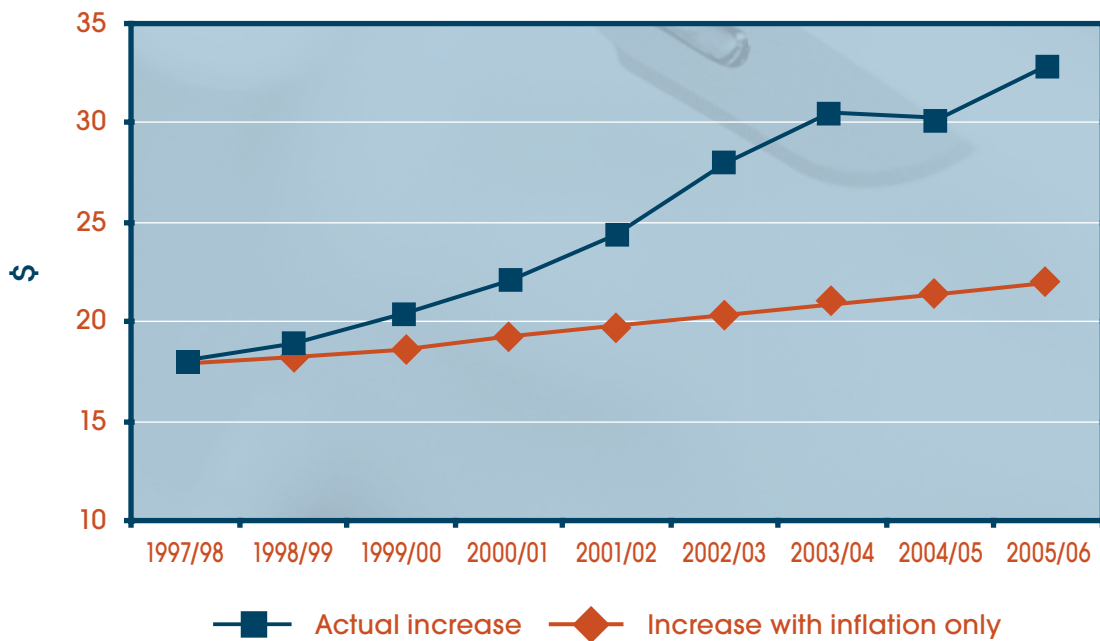
Figure 9: Percentage of specialist visits* which are bulkbilled (%)



* excludes pathologists and radiologists. Refers to out-of-hospital work.

The out-of-pocket cost of seeing a specialist, for people who are not bulkbilled, has risen from \$17.99 in 1996/97 to \$32.88 in 2005/06 (see figure 10). If the out-of-pocket costs had simply kept pace with inflation, the cost in 2005/06 would have been \$22.07.

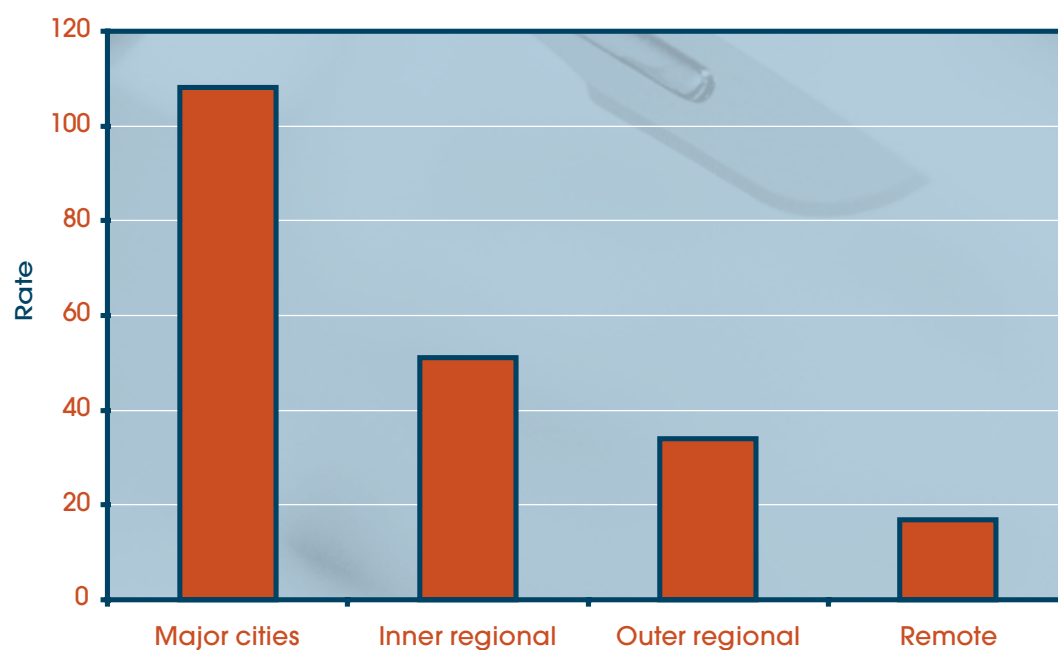
Figure 10: Average out-of-pocket costs of a visit to the specialist for non bulkbilled patients (\$)



Where do specialists work?

Specialists work overwhelmingly in cities. There are six times as many specialists per person in the city as in remote regions. Even areas just outside cities have half the rate of specialists as cities (see figure 11).

Figure 11: Specialists per 100,000 people by geographical region



What are we not being told?

There are many important questions which are not being answered by the Australian Government. They include the following.

- What is the average waiting time for a visit to a specialist for non-urgent care?
- Is this different for people in cities and people in rural and remote Australia ?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for private patients having surgery?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for private patients seeing an anaesthetist in a hospital?
- What is the bulkbilling rate for specialists in different local government areas?
- What is the bulkbilling rate for different types of specialists?
- What is the average number of visits to different types of specialists in different local government areas?
- What are the average out-of-pocket costs for people seeing specialists in different local government areas?

Summary

Specialists are highly concentrated in cities, and many rural people have difficulty seeing them.

The cost of seeing a specialist is rising. Bulkbilling rates for specialists working in the community are low and falling.

We have almost no information on the cost of private specialist services in hospitals. The Australian Government needs to release this information.