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Doctors group warns on after-hours costs

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A DOCTORS' group has warned the federal government it will have to nearly treble its incentive payments to encourage after-hours services if it is serious about expanding their availability through its new network of Medicare Locals.

The peak body representing deputising services, which offer after-hours visits on behalf of GPs, has told the government that the \$70 million currently spent on after-hours incentives is worth about \$2.61 a head of population — but this will have to be increased when the funding is transferred to Medicare Locals.

In a five-page document posing more than a dozen questions on the rollout of the \$416m Medicare Locals program, the National Association of Medical Deputising Services says the per-capita payment would need to be in the order of \$6.25 to maintain existing after-hours services and to introduce new services.

It also seeks clarification over how Medicare Locals will be funded, whether they will provide services directly, how information will be shared with patients' usual GPs and what measures will be taken to encourage GPs to continue providing their own after-hours care.

The Medicare Locals program was announced in last year's federal budget as part of Labor's health reform push.

The organisations are meant to better co-ordinate GPs, nurses

and other health workers in the community to help patients get the care they need.

From the start, the government made clear Medicare Locals would take over responsibility for co-ordinating after-hours care, but the plans have met fierce resistance.

The government was forced into a partial backdown in December, when it agreed to defer for two years the scrapping of incentives worth \$2000 a year for each GP in exchange for them providing after-hours cover.

The first 15 Medicare Locals are due to be up and running on July 1, although applications for the first round have only just closed.

From July 1, patients are to be able to consult a GP after-hours through a National Health Call Centre Network; Medicare Locals will assume responsibility for co-ordinating face-to-face after-hours GP visits from July 2013.

NAMDS president Stuart Tait said GP after-hours incentives had not been indexed for inflation since their introduction eight years ago, and the government would have to pump in much more money to fulfil its promises.

"There's no chance this program will start on 1 July — it's ludicrous," Mr Tait said.

In the past week, the Australian Medical Association has written to every federal MP outlining its opposition to Medicare Locals. It claims they do "not give adequate recognition to the fundamental role of GPs in primary care and removes GPs from key decision-making processes".