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How does your health fund treat your profession?

Nurse practitioners are among the most highly trained nurses in Australia, with postgraduate master's level qualifications and extensive clinical experience. Despite this, their role is routinely undervalued by the very institutions designed to support patient access to care – the private health funds.

In the operating theatre, nurse practitioners (NPs) undertake the role of surgical assistant, contributing directly to patient safety, procedural efficiency and high-quality care. In November 2025, the Australian Government amended the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) to include nurse practitioner surgical assistant item numbers that aligned with medical practitioner surgical assistant item numbers. This legislative change should have guaranteed equitable rebates for patients and professional recognition for NPs. On paper, it was a milestone for nursing and for patient care and equity.

The reality is starkly different. Many health funds rebate only the Medicare Schedule Fee for NP surgical assistant services, roughly half the rebate paid when the same service is performed by a medical practitioner surgical assistant. Worse, health funds generally will not pay NPs directly, forcing patients to submit claims themselves. Medical practitioners, by contrast, are reimbursed directly, sparing patients this administrative burden. The inequity is clear – patients continue to pay out of pocket, NPs are undervalued and the system fails to honour legislative reform.

This discrepancy is more than an administrative inconvenience – it is professional discrimination. NPs deliver

the same high-quality care as their medical colleagues, yet private health funds continue to treat NPs as second-tier practitioners.

If the nursing profession is to fully realise its potential in Australia's healthcare landscape, these systemic inequities must be challenged. Health professionals, professional organisations and patients alike must advocate for policy alignment between legislative recognition and health fund rebate practice.

Equity reflects whether a system genuinely values all its professionals and the patients who rely on them. So ask yourself: How does your health fund treat your profession? If the answer is 'unequally', it is time to speak up. Even if you are not an NP surgical assistant, you may one day be their patient. Your voice matters now.

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Same work but not equal access

Health funds deny nurse practitioners direct patient rebates for identical work as surgical assistants.



Direct claim,
full rebate



Cannot claim directly,
patients pay more

MBS mirrored items
– identical work, identical MBS status –
but health funds discriminate.

It's time for equity in health care

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