

Mixed reception for health changes

By Natasha Rudra

Midwives have welcomed the federal health budget with open arms but Health Minister Nicola Roxon's other changes were not so popular with lobby groups.

For the first time, midwives will receive access to Medicare and the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme under a package worth \$66.6 million over four years.

Some midwives will also get medical indemnity insurance and the Government will fund a 24-hour telephone hotline for pregnant women and new mothers.

Australian College of Midwives executive officer Dr Barbara Vernon labelled Tuesday's budget "historic" in its acceptance of midwife care.

"This is actually a whole shift where it will give women much more choice about accessing a continuity of care from a midwife or group of midwives who are all working collaboratively," she said.

Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute director Robert Wells said midwives were the big winners on budget night but the Government's measures could have been crafted better.

"I would suspect most of that choice will be for people in urban areas where there are already

services so it won't really help people in a lot of country towns where the obstetrics services have closed down," he said.

The National Association of Specialist Obstetricians and Gynaecologists warned the Government to be cautious in funding "alternative models of care".

Association president Dr Andrew Pesce said the group was also disappointed that the Government chose to wind back rebates for private obstetric care.

Dr Vernon said the move would give women "integrated" care and midwives would work closely with doctors to provide care during and after birth.

Mr Wells gave the Government an overall thumbs up for the health budget.

But he said the Government could have done more when scaling back the 30 per cent private health insurance rebate, saving \$1.9 billion.

"If you're going to break an election promise perhaps you could do something more radical and get that sorted out in a more fundamental way because basically it's just a savings measure," he said.

The Australian Health Care Reform Alliance said the rebate was costly and "clearly inequitable".