

Inflation hits life's essentials

This week's surging inflation figures are further proof of the dire need for an increase in the age pension, say older Australians. National Seniors chief executive, Michael O'Neill, said that this quarter's rise, representing the largest annual change since the December quarter 1995, had come at a terrible time for many pensioners. "The CPI figures show pensioners are under extreme pressure, with their essentials going up so that their pension dollars just can't keep pace," he said. "Hospital and medical services have jumped by four per cent. Along with rent, which increased 2.2%, the largest quarterly increase since March 1989, pensioners are being hit with price hikes on life's essentials. People have to keep a roof over their heads and see the doctor when a health problem arises. This is not discretionary spending: rent and medical costs are not optional and really hurt for pensioners on a strict budget.

"Single age pensioners who are renting privately are the most vulnerable. I know of people who are constantly worried about their next rent increase, fearing they'll have nowhere to go if their rent is increased dramatically," he said. "The only relief in today's figures is that fruit and vegetables seem to be more affordable."

"While the majority of people bearing the brunt of these living cost increases are pensioners, let's not forget low-income self-funded retirees. They are also being stung by the cost of living increases as many have experienced income losses due to recent stock market drops. Many people on low, fixed incomes are really struggling now."

More on the Medicare levy

National Seniors provided the Senate Economics Committee with a submission last week regarding the Medicare Levy Surcharge Thresholds Bill. The proposed changes will increase the Medicare levy surcharge threshold for individuals from \$50,000 to \$100,000 and for couples from \$100,000 to \$150,000. In its submission, National Seniors outlined the concerns of members regarding the proposed changes to the threshold, in particular, the expected pressure it will place on private health insurance premiums and the flow-on effect that may have, placing increased pressure on the public hospital system. Representatives from National Seniors will be appearing before the Senate Committee next week in Sydney to raise these concerns. For details, contact Anna on 02 6230 4588.

Assurances sought over FuelWatch

National Seniors this week provided a submission to the Senate Economics Committee Inquiry into the proposed national FuelWatch scheme. Aside from lending its strong support for initiatives that put downward pressure on petrol prices, National Seniors raised a number of concerns with the proposal and sought several assurances on behalf of members. In particular, National Seniors wants to ensure that older motorists would not be disadvantaged in accessing the scheme due to their generally lower levels of internet and mobile phone use. National Seniors also took the opportunity to raise concerns about the pressure increasing fuel prices is placing on the community generally and older Australians on fixed incomes in particular. NSA will participate in a public hearing on this topic in Canberra shortly.

Steer clear of scammers

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that almost \$1 billion dollars has been lost by Australians to personal fraud over a twelve-month period. The 2007 Personal Fraud Survey found that 453,100 Australians lost on average \$2,160 as a result of personal fraud. The top three scams which people were exposed to were: fake lotteries, phishing and related scams, and chain letters. A common phishing scam is email supposedly from your bank. You should suspect a scam if you're asked for your account details or your passwords by email as no legitimate company would request your account details or passwords by email. If you get this kind of email, it is almost certainly a scam, even if the URL (website link) or email address look genuine. Clicking on links in these emails can take you to a website that looks similar to the real bank's website, and scammers obtain your banking passwords when you log-in to the bogus website. To see an example of a real scam email visit www.nationalseniors.com.au and click on 'the latest *Connect*'. To learn more about scams or to report a phishing incident, see www.scamwatch.gov.au.

Queensland Housing Minister Robert Swarten has warned elderly home owners to beware of predators posing as legitimate tradespeople after reports of unlicensed contractors targeting elderly home owners on Brisbane's southside. To check a tradesperson's licence, call BSA on 1300 272 272.

Use it or lose it

Those who don't engage in complex mental activity over their lifetime have twice the shrinkage in a key part of the brain in old age, according to researchers from the University of New South Wales. People who have been more mentally active over their lives have a larger hippocampus - which relates to memory - and it shrinks at half the rate of those who have lower mental activity. This is the first time that researchers have compared participants' brains over a period of time in relation to mental activity patterns, adding weight to previous work which shows that complex mental activity helps prevent dementia. "This is a significant finding because a small hippocampus is a specific risk factor for developing Alzheimer's disease," says the lead author, Dr Michael Valenzuela, from UNSW's School of Psychiatry. "It also helps throw some light on why there has been this consistent link between mental activity and lower dementia risk," he said. In this study, the researchers looked at a group of more than 50 people who were 60 years of age over a period of three years. "Our prior research shows the risk for dementia is quite malleable, even into late life," Dr Valenzuela said. His suggestions for cognitive, social and physical activities include dancing, tai chi, sailing, travelling and learning a new language.