



Response to ABC Four Corners Program ‘Pain Factory’

The unbalanced views portrayed by Four Corners in its ‘Pain Factory’ episode (08/04/24) should be of great concern to the Australian community, particularly to those reasonably considering treatment for painful and disabling spinal conditions, for which safety and efficacy are well established.

While surgery is appropriate for only a minority of people with back problems, approximately 45,000 Australians undergo spine surgery every year. Those Australians do so following discussion of their individual situation and what the surgery involves with their surgeon.

The vast majority of Australian spinal surgeons are members of the Australian Orthopaedic Association (AOA), the Neurosurgical Association of Australasia (NSA) and/or the Spine Society of Australia (SSA). During the six months ABC researchers and producers were working on the story, Four Corners chose not to approach any of the above professional bodies for their comment or assistance.

As the leading authorities in the provision of information on the management of spinal complaints to the Australian community, the AOA, NSA and SSA are committed to ensuring the highest possible standard of spinal care and ethical behaviour of their members. It is recognised that the overwhelming majority of Australia’s spinal surgeons are responsible, ethical and always act in the best interest of patients, charging fees that reflect the skill, time and resources required for spinal procedures.

Our organisations believe that it is essential that patients are fully informed prior to their treatment including obtaining and facilitating the provision of second opinions when appropriate and/or desired.

In a similar spirit, we believe patients are entitled to understand the basis of fees charged and seek alternate service provision to assist them to make the most appropriate decision.

Our organisations believe that all surgeons should only use appropriate MBS codes when charging for services. Collectively we worked with the Department of Health in 2017 and 2018 when the review of the billing codes for spinal surgery was undertaken. At both that time, and subsequently, we have advocated to the Department and insurers that a robust auditing process needs to form an integral part of any billing process. To date this advocacy has fallen on deaf ears.

Importantly, for those considering spinal surgery and who have concerns following the Four Corners Program, please review the outcomes data produced by the Australian Spine Registry at www.spineregistry.org.au and discuss them with your surgeon.

The Australian Spine Registry (ASR) is an initiative of the SSA, aimed at improving the quality of care provided to individuals undergoing spine surgery in Australia. The five years of data collected by the ASR provides an important resource for surgeons who perform spine surgery in Australian hospitals.

We believe that it is essential that all stakeholders in the provision of spinal care, work collaboratively to ensure the best quality outcomes for all Australians that undergo spinal



surgery. As the self-proclaimed home of investigative journalism in Australia, we are extremely disappointed that the Four Corners program chose to air a very unbalanced perspective of an extremely important procedure for thousands of Australians every year.

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