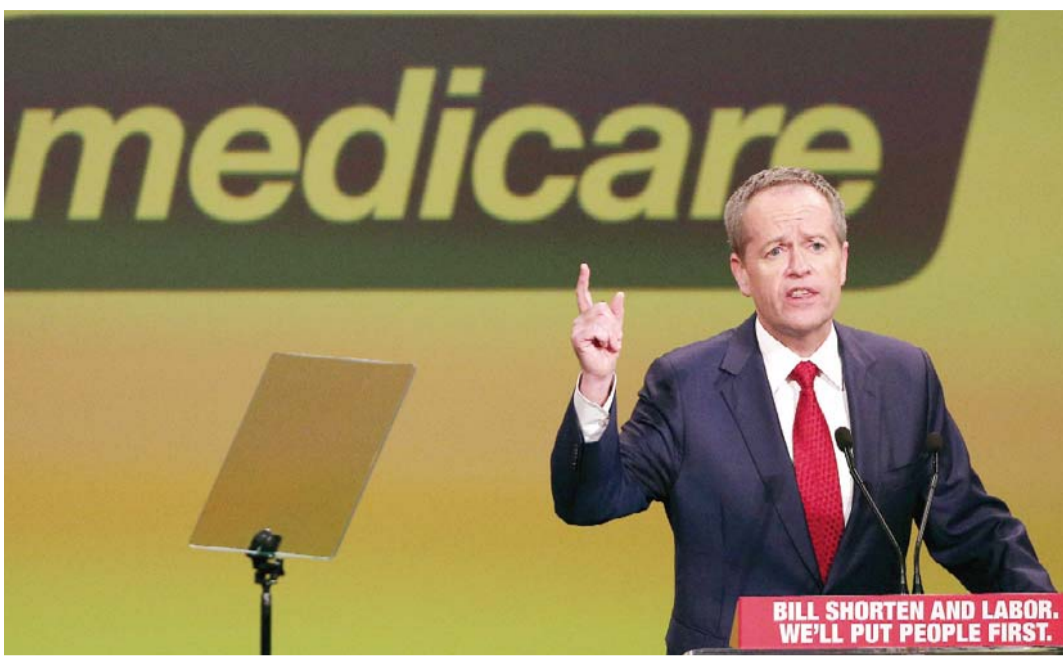


AUSTRALIAN OPPOSITION LEADER MAKES HEALTH CENTER OF ELECTION



SYDNEY: Australia's opposition Labor Party leader Bill Shorten speaks about Medicare yesterday. — AP

CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA: Opposition leader Bill Shorten used his center-left Labor Party's official campaign launch yesterday to cast July 2 general elections as a referendum on the future of Australia's universal health care system.

A Labor government introduced government-funded Medicare in 1983 to provide free or subsidized health care for all Australian citizens and permanent residents. Labor argues the conservative coalition government plans to privatize Medicare - a claim Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull denies.

"If you want to know why this election will make a difference to you, your family, your street, your workplace, to Australia's future, I can give you the answer of why politics matters in one word: Medicare," Shorten told a Sydney auditorium in front of the slogan: "We'll put people first." The government has been quick to assure the public that the popular health care system is not under threat.

Turnbull, who will officially launch his conservative Liberal Party's campaign next weekend, announced on Saturday that his government had scrapped plans to outsource the Medicare payments system to private enterprise. "Medicare will never ever be privatized," Turnbull told reporters Sunday. "What Bill Shorten is doing is peddling an

extraordinary lie so audacious ... it defies belief."

Six weeks after the election was called, Shorten launched his campaign in western Sydney where Labor hopes to win several seats from the government. An opinion poll published by Fairfax Media on Saturday showed Labor ahead of the government with support of 51 percent of respondents compared to 49 percent for the conservative coalition. But this lead is within the poll's 2.6 percentage point margin of error. The poll was based on a nationwide telephone survey of 1,437 voters from June 14 to 16. Many analysts don't believe Labor's support will deliver the 21 seats it needs to form a majority in the 150-seat House of Representatives, where parties form governments.

All but one of Labor's surviving prime ministers attended the launch: Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and Julia Gillard. Kevin Rudd, who was ousted by Gillard in an internal party showdown in 2010, then replaced her in a similar coup in 2013, was in Russia on business. Since Rudd was elected in 2007, there have been four changes of prime minister in an era of extraordinary volatility in Australian politics. Shorten was a powerbroker within the party who was instrumental in overthrowing both Rudd and Gillard. — AP

4,800 NURSES SET TO STRIKE AT 5 TWIN CITIES HOSPITALS

MINNEAPOLIS: Both sides say a strike by about 4,800 nurses appears inevitable at five hospitals in the Minneapolis area. Members of the Minnesota Nurses Association planned to walk out at 7 a.m. Yesterday at hospitals operated by Allina Health - Abbott Northwestern in Minneapolis, Mercy in Coon Rapids, United in St. Paul, Unity in Fridley, and the Phillips Eye Institute in Minneapolis.

No new talks were scheduled. The strike would last a week. The main dispute is over Allina's effort to switch union nurses to the same health insurance plans as more than 30,000 other Allina employees and their family members, which carry lower monthly premiums but higher out-of-pocket costs. Allina plans to keep the facilities operating with replacement nurses. The last major Twin Cities nurses strike was in 2010. — AP

HOLOGIC WINS EMERGENCY US AUTHORIZATION FOR ZIKA TEST

CREATING MORE TESTING LABS

MIAMI: Hologic Inc won emergency US authorization to sell its Zika test, expanding the number of public and private labs that can test for the virus as health officials brace for a rise this summer in the number of infections.

The US Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use authorization for the company's Aptima test to detect Zika virus in human serum and plasma specimens. The test will be available for use immediately in every US state as well as Puerto Rico and US territories, the company said.

Aptima is the third commercial test to be granted emergency use authorization by the FDA. Focus Diagnostics and Germany's Altona Diagnostics GmbH were also given emergency use authorization. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also can test for the virus.

In February, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Zika a global public health emergency. The virus has been associated with microcephaly, a birth defect characterized by an unusually small head and potential developmental problems. On Thursday, US health officials reported three babies born with birth defects likely linked to Zika infection in the mother during pregnancy.

Authorities in Brazil, the country hardest hit by the virus, have confirmed more than 1,400 cases of microcephaly in babies whose mothers were exposed to Zika during pregnancy. On



MIAMI: A woman looks at a Center for Disease Control (CDC) health advisory sign about the dangers of the Zika virus as she lines up for a security screening at Miami International Airport. — AFP

Tuesday, the WHO said there was a "very low risk" of further spread of the virus for people attending the Olympic Games, to be held in

Brazil in August. Shares of the company were up about 1.5 percent at \$34.30 in extended trading on Friday. — Reuters

FACTORY SNAG HITS GSK SUPPLY, CAUSING DANISH ANESTHETIC SHORTAGE

DENMARK: Manufacturing problems at a factory in Italy have disrupted production of some GlaxoSmithKline medicines, leading to shortages of a commonly used opioid anesthetic in Denmark.

The British drug maker said on Friday it had temporarily suspended manufacturing at its Parma site, which makes sterile products, to investigate environmental monitoring, adding this was unrelated to risks from any medicines.

The factory has now recommenced manufacturing. However, a spokeswoman

said a small number of countries had experienced shortages of certain products since April. In Denmark, doctors said they were running out of the anesthetic Ultiva, which is a preferred product because patients wake up quickly after surgery. Recovery typically occurs within five to 10 minutes.

The Parma factory also makes GSK's new injectable drug Nucala for severe asthma and Benlysta for lupus, but the spokeswoman said these medicines were not in short supply because there were plentiful stocks. — Reuters



LONDON: Signage for GlaxoSmithKline is seen on its offices. — AFP

PATIENTS GREETED BY ROBOT AT BELGIAN HOSPITAL

OSTEND, BELGIUM: A Belgian hospital has just welcomed its newest staff member: Pepper, a humanoid robot that speaks 19 languages. Developed to improve social and health care by the Belgian company Zora Bots, Pepper joined the medical team as a receptionist at Ostend hospital AZ Damiaan.

Pepper will introduce visitors to the hospital, provide information and guide visitors and patients to the correct floor and room. With a speed of just 3 km/h (1.8 mph), Pepper is also able to guide slower patients. Fully charged, it can work for up to 20 hours on its own.

"The robot itself is a meter 20 high, so it is not like Arnold Schwarzenegger with a leather jacket and an 'I will be back' robot," said Zora Bots' co-chief executive, Fabrice Goffin. "It is a quite nice robot and the reactions are positive for the moment."

During the first week, Pepper was mainly used on the hospital's maternity department. Bieke Vandeputte, the mother of a newborn baby, was amazed. "It is another way of making contact and maybe it is reassuring that it is a robot for some people," she said. "The baby was really sure. He did not mind putting his

hands on it. It did not frighten him so I think it will be important. Especially for children."

Pepper is not the first robot used at the AZ Damiaan hospital, but it is the first to communicate with patients and to have the ability to guide them. Before the arrival of Pepper, the staff had already worked with a predecessor, Zora, for about a year. Zora is smaller and slower than Pepper and used mainly in physical therapy classes. At a price of 30,000 Euros, Pepper is expensive. So far, only Japanese customers have bought one to use at home. — Reuters

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