



# Time to consider new health policies

The move by Vhi to retire some health plans means members need to carefully review their options, writes **John Hearne**

## Consumer interests

**I**N a surprise move, Vhi has announced that it will be retiring some of its most popular plans, including Health Plus Extra, Health Plus Access, Health Plus Excess, and Health Access.

Health Plus Extra is the new name for what used to be Plan B Options. Health Plus Access is the old Plan B while Health Plus Excess is the old Plan B Excess. They currently range in price from €3,400 per adult for Health Plus Extra to €2,276 per adult for Health Access.

These plans will no longer be available to new members or those renewing from May 1. Dermot Goode of Total-healthcover.ie, part of the Lockton group, says that this change will impact thousands of Vhi members who have been on these plans for years.

"In particular," he says, "this will be of concern to older members who renewed on these plans to retain full cover for major orthopaedic and ophthalmic procedures. They will have no option now but to shop around for alternative cover from their next renewal date."

While these plans do offer good cover, some have been on the market for nearly 30 years and, like all legacy plans, have become very expensive. In the last 12 months alone, customers on these plans have been hit with significant price hikes.

In April 2023, Health Plus Extra was priced at €2,951

per adult. Then, last October, it increased to €3,169. Six weeks ago, on March 1, it jumped again, this time to €3,400 per adult. Taken together, these hikes represent a cumulative increase of no less than €449 per adult. A retired couple who decided to renew on the Health Plus Extra scheme from March 1 would have to pay almost €900 extra to cover the cost.

The good news, however, is that there is a range of appropriate alternatives available from Vhi, including its Advanced Care product range. Mr Goode, pictured right, sounds a warning, however. He says that members need to be careful that in moving from these older legacy products that they're not transferred to more expensive options.

"For example, those on Health Plus Extra, which costs €3,400, could consider the Vhi Advanced Care Extra scheme which costs €3,327, but the out-patient cover is not as generous. They will likely be offered

the Advanced Care Extra Day-to-Day scheme but this will increase their cost further to €3,543 per adult."

He adds that members who need full psychiatric cover of up to 180 days need to be careful. As the Health Plus Extra scheme is being retired, these members will have to consider either the aforementioned Advanced Care Extra or Advanced Care Extra Day-to-Day

schemes to retain this important benefit. There are numerous lower-cost options available from Vhi but these only cover psychiatric up to 100 days.

"Before opting for Vhi alternatives," says Mr Goode, "we would urge all these Vhi members to fully review their options across the market as there may be other plans that could deliver equivalent cover at a much lower cost."

For example, there are other market options for Health Plus Extra members that offer exceptional cover for approximately €2,400 per adult, as against €3,400 for Health Plus Extra.

Those on Health Access (€2,276) or Health Plus Excess (€2,471) may be able to save up to €400 per adult by shopping around across the market. While there is a range of Vhi corporate plans that are priced well below the plans being retired, Vhi members need to be careful with these too. Mr Goode says that PMI 3613 is a good semi-private corporate plan at €1,666 per adult. It doesn't fully cover major orthopaedic and ophthalmic surgeries however but incorporates a 20% shortfall. At €1,908 per adult, PMI 4810 is a good private room corporate plan, but it has the same 20% shortfall and only offers 100 days of psychiatric cover.

In addition, many of the

Vhi corporate plans don't cover certain cardiac stent

procedures, which could be a concern for older members with underlying conditions.

"Many Vhi members affected by these plan retirements may be inclined to just accept the alternative offered by Vhi," Mr Goode says. "We would urge all members not to auto-renew on whatever is offered by Vhi, but to take this opportunity to check all options across the market first. They may be shocked to find they can source equivalent cover at a lower cost. For those fearful of change, seek help from a trusted friend or family member or engage a qualified broker to do this review work for you."

Mr Goode also anticipates that many consumers out there are members of plans through an employer group scheme, either through salary deduction or company payment. If this is you, it's important to review your options urgently.

In terms of engaging with either Vhi or the other insurers, contact them by phone to discuss your options as all calls are recorded. Do this well in advance of your renewal to give yourself plenty of time.

Decide on your budget before you contact them, and challenge them to find the closest equivalent plan that fits this budget. If you're talking to a new health insurer, make sure to disclose everything: Current plan, medical history, planned treatments and so on.

Whatever alternatives they offer, have them explain exactly how these compare to your existing cover so you understand all plan differentials. If you're still not sure or if you're confused by all the options, seek independent advice before making

your final decision.

Before you go shopping for a new insurer, the Health Insurance Authority (HIA) agrees that the first thing you should do is set a budget. Then look into the costs per person. Don't think in terms of family plans. Adults, young adults and children can, and probably should, be on different plans. Adult policies will be more expensive than child policies and some plans have discounted rates for young adults aged 18-25. If you have children, check to see if insurers have any offers such as free cover for one child or half price for children.

Next, prioritise your needs. Decide if you want treatment in a public or private hospital. Do you want access to the hi-tech hospitals, like the Blackrock Clinic, the Mater Private, and the Beacon Hospital? Make sure that the hospitals you need are covered.

If you have used your health insurance in the past, take your cue from how you've used it. Routine treat-

ments are usually fully covered in standard private hospitals. However, you may have to increase your premium to ensure full cover for treatments such as orthopaedic, ophthalmic and cardiac procedures. Are you prepared to pay a higher premium for outpatient benefits such as GP, physio and consultant costs?

The HIA is a great source of free and independent information about private health insurance. Its role is to increase awareness about health insurance services and related consumer rights. Its website, [hia.ie](http://hia.ie) has a raft of information and a handy comparison tool which allows you to measure policies against each other in order to find the best fit for you. You can also call the consumer helpline on 01 4060080 to find out about the health insurance options available to you.





“For those fearful of change, seek help from a trusted friend or family member or engage a qualified broker to do this review work for you



Vhi plans to retire some of its most popular plans. Affected customers must start looking for new plans as soon as they can.