

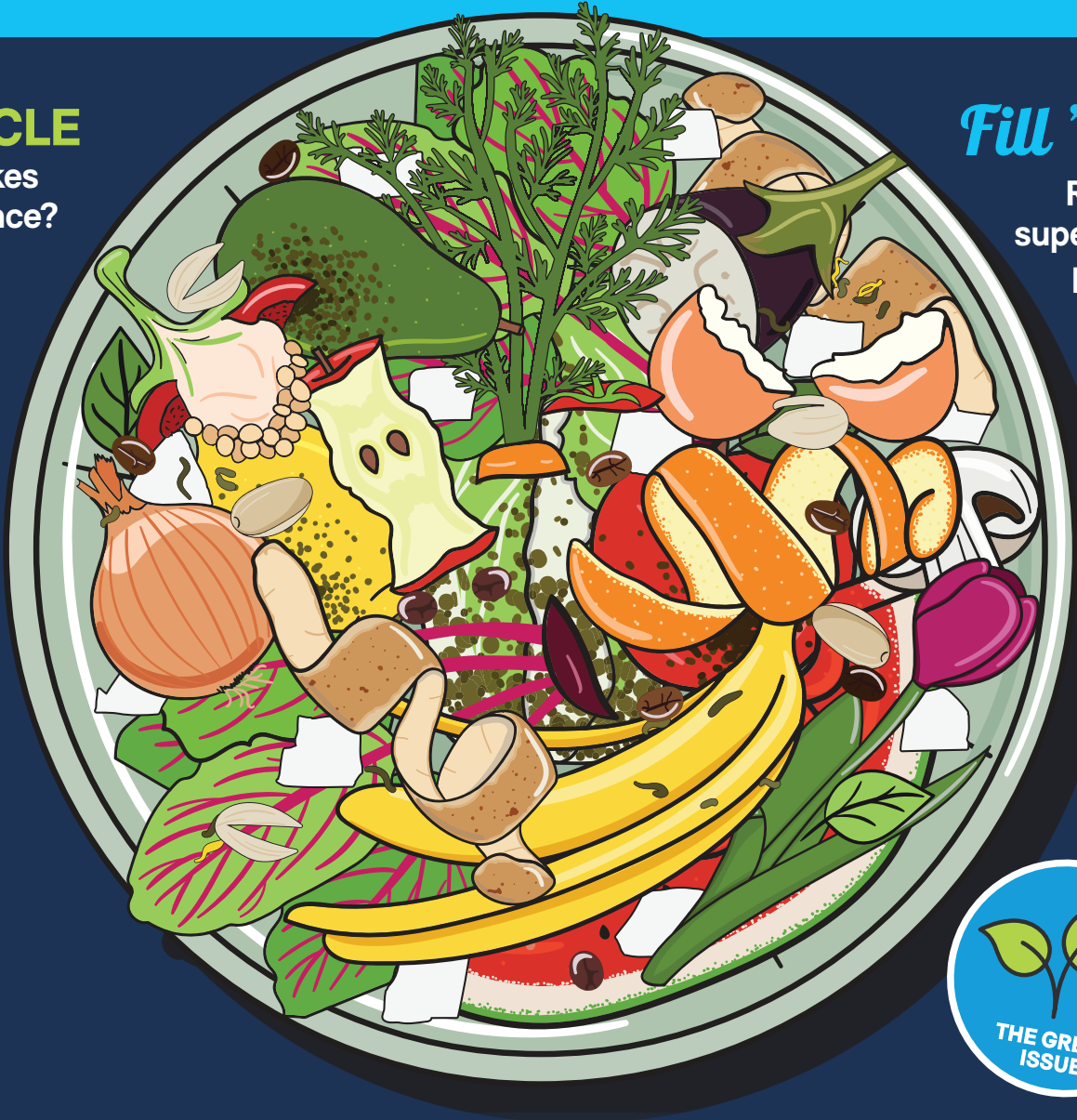
CHOICE

LIFE CYCLE

Do cheap bikes
go the distance?

252 products TESTED

Printers
Dash cams
Stick vacs
Lawnmowers
Digital radios
Induction
cooktops
Convection
microwaves
and more



Fill 'er up

Refillable
supermarket
products



Waste not

14 practical tips to reduce food waste

Plus Sustainable seafood, ready meals & spotting greenwash

Go for green

Let's keep big business on the hook

Whenever I hear talk of personal, individual responsibility for climate change, I hate to admit I sometimes roll my eyes.

When you consider the huge impacts of the fossil fuel industry, agriculture and even the fashion industry, the choices we make as individuals often feel insignificant in comparison. Shouldn't we focus on regulating the worst offenders before we come for the little guys like you and me?

Worse still, the very idea of a "carbon footprint" was borne of a marketing scheme by British Petroleum, designed to shift blame for the climate crisis away from fossil fuel giants back to the individual.

So what does that mean for consumers? Should we continue sucking on soggy paper straws and sorting our rubbish into a zillion different bins while mega celebs like Taylor Swift rack up air miles on private jets? It's a tough question to answer. But while it's easy to curl up in a foetal ball of concentrated nihilism and admit defeat, I'd argue that the choices consumers make still absolutely matter. We should always be climate conscious with our purchases.

Because when we band together and make climate-conscious decisions, consumers are not only saving money on energy costs, we're telling the companies – loud and clear – this is a priority for us. We want sustainability to be front and centre in the products we buy and consume.

This matters. And we know this matters because we're already seeing big corporations trying to game the system and convince consumers they're doing the right thing, even when they're absolutely not.

Greenwashing – the act of misleading the public that a company with regards to sustainability – is very much on the rise. This makes things doubly hard for consumers. In addition to the challenge of picking the right product to buy, sometimes you have to do your homework in order to find out if the claims a company is making are actually legit.

It can be very tiring.

That's where CHOICE comes in. In this very issue we investigate the claims of the seafood industry and sustainable fishing, which can be very murky and confusing. We plan to look into more green claims made by companies in the near future, to hold them accountable on these issues. Stay tuned for that!



But arguably consumers (and even consumer advocates like CHOICE) shouldn't have to investigate claims like these. Corporations should not only be held accountable for greenwashing claims, but should actually do the genuine work of being sustainable in the first place. Unfortunately, until the day it's cheaper to go green, that almost certainly won't happen without a fight.

And one of the few ways we can fight is with our wallets.

Mark Serrels
CHOICE Editorial Director
Email: mserrels@choice.com.au

CHOICE

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the best goods and services, and avoid the worst. Wherever possible, we pay full price for the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising or freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by membership. Memberships include online access and services such as CHOICE Help. CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert

assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

BECOME A MEMBER To review the full range of membership options and benefits go to choice.com.au/signup.

MEMBERSHIPS/RENEWALS Call 1800 069 552 or email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au.





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CHOICE magazine provides a selection of our top product reviews. We can't always include all the models we've tested, but you'll always find the products that scored the best. To view complete results for all our tests, go to choice.com.au, or call Customer Service on 1800 069 552 to add full online access to your membership package.

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Join the call for fairer supermarket pricing



A survey of almost 11,000 CHOICE supporters conducted in November 2023 found four in five think some Coles and Woolworths 'specials' or promotions make it difficult to know if you're getting a genuine discount or value for money.

From specials that aren't specials to potentially misleading pricing claims, we continue to find examples of dodgy and confusing pricing practices used by major supermarkets. Countless CHOICE supporters have shared their concerns with us:

"I am frustrated and angry with the price dishonesty. Often, when a product is marked as a half-price special it has had a price rise from the previous week before being advertised as a half-price special," says one supporter.

In our recent submission to the Senate Select Committee on Supermarket Prices, we called for changes to the law to ensure supermarkets use fair and transparent pricing. CHOICE has made a number of recommendations, including the banning of unfair pricing practices, introducing rules about discounts and promotions, enforcing and expanding the Grocery Unit Pricing Code, requiring supermarkets to publish historical grocery pricing information, and reforming competition and consumer laws to ensure the ACCC has the powers it needs to hold supermarkets to account.

Join us in the call for fairer supermarket pricing and sign the petition at choice.com.au/fairersupermarkets. And if you see any examples of confusing or dodgy specials, email them to campaigns@choice.com.au.

BEA SHERWOOD





Government consults on plan to block SMS scams

The Commonwealth has been seeking feedback from consumers, industry, charities and government services on its latest plan to combat SMS scams. Discussions focused on whether the planned SMS sender ID registry should be mandatory for all organisations that use SMS sender IDs to contact consumers.

“We’re committed to a national rollout of the registry that works for both Australians and the businesses that serve them,” says Communications Minister Michelle Rowland.

An SMS sender ID or message header is the name that appears at the top of a text message thread to tell you who it’s from. Companies and government agencies often

use them when communicating with consumers, but scammers have been able to use technology to send malicious messages using the IDs of legitimate businesses or government agencies.

A sender ID registry will establish a list of numbers associated with businesses’ message headers. Telcos will be required to block any messages that are trying to use names that are coming from numbers not associated with them. The federal government set up a pilot registry in December last year, after allocating \$10 million over four years to launch and maintain the program.

LIAM KENNEDY

Five more telcos warned for allowing scam texts

The communications regulator has directed more telcos to follow anti-scam rules, saying the companies failed to check that millions of text messages sent through their networks weren’t scams. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) issued warnings to Message4U, SMS Broadcast, DirectSMS, Esendex Australia and MessageBird after an investigation found the companies hadn’t properly checked that messages weren’t using fake sender IDs.

“Scammers will always look for cracks in systems and if even one telco fails to have its compliance in order, it can open the door for scammers to target Australians,” says ACMA member Samantha Yorke.

The ACMA says the companies allowed almost 50 million texts to be sent that were in breach of anti-scam protections. Around 2.5 million of the texts impersonated well-known institutions.

The telcos could face penalties of up to \$250,000 for breaching these directions to follow industry rules. “We will be closely monitoring for any scam activity coming via these telcos and will not hesitate to take action if we find evidence Australians are being placed in harm’s way again,” adds Yorke.

The latest raft of warnings comes after the ACMA issued similar directions to at least six telcos last year.

LIAM KENNEDY



Warning to mourners over funeral live stream scams

It seems like there is no limit to how low scammers are willing to stoop in the effort to steal your hard-earned money. The government of South Australia has put out a warning for mourners who are being targeted by scams



trying to charge them to view live-streamed funerals. Live streaming of funerals has risen in popularity since the pandemic, allowing people to view services from anywhere. However, the SA government warns that you should never be charged money to view a streaming link – the costs should always be paid for by the organiser of the service.

“While these live-stream services are often legitimate, scammers have been gaining access to relevant information and exploiting mourners with false invitations and links,” it warns.

“If you are asked to provide payment details, it’s best to contact the relevant funeral home directly, using information you have found yourself. Use the funeral home’s website or the phonebook to get in contact and gain the correct link to the service.”

They’re also warning of criminals setting up fake crowd-funding pages to supposedly “help the family” of the deceased.

JARNI BLAKKARLY

Scam victims head to Canberra

In early February, a group of scam victims headed to Canberra to tell politicians what it’s like to lose many thousands of dollars and have your life financially upended by a scam. They were part of a new initiative called the Parliamentary Friendship Group for Scams Protection, founded by independent MPs Monique Ryan and Kate Chaney, and Labor Senator Jess Walsh. Speaking at the launch, Consumer Action Law Centre CEO Stephanie Tonkin said “every day we hear terrible stories of people who have lost everything with nowhere to turn”.

“For thousands of families in Australia, this is a devastating crisis, and the community expects banks to lift their game and start taking responsibility for reimbursement,” she added.

“We also want to see banks, telcos and online platforms set up effective ways to stop the onslaught of scams that are plaguing Australians every day.”

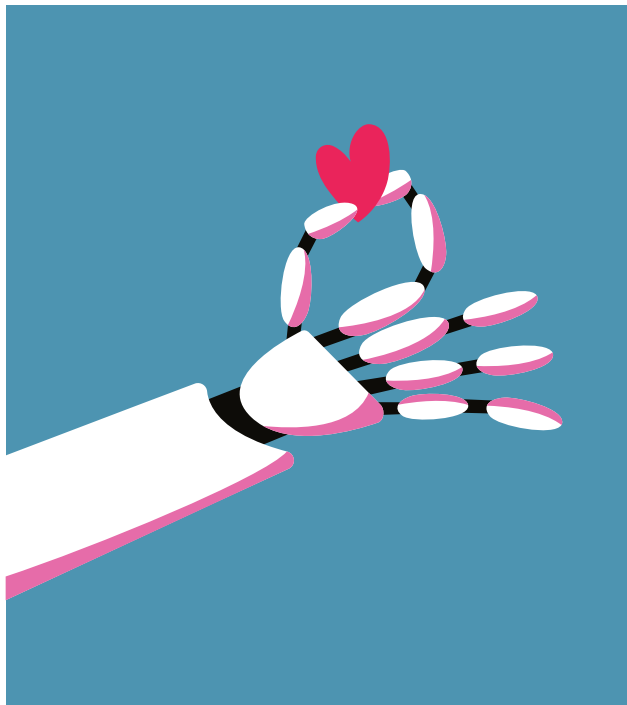
One of the scam victims, Nina Merrilees, described what

happens when people try to recover stolen funds.

“The process takes months of reporting, phoning, filling in online forms and emailing numerous organisations, only to be told that they will not be reimbursed for any of their losses.”

ANDY KOLLMORGEN





'AI girlfriends' sharing personal details with advertisers

A recent report by the Mozilla Foundation has given new meaning to 'feeling used' in a relationship. Researchers investigated 11 romantic AI chatbots (which users can interact with like they would a romantic partner) and found "disturbing new ways" they were risking user privacy and security.

The concept of an AI-human romance may be a little unconventional, but what's concerning is that many of these 'AI girlfriends' or 'boyfriends' encourage users to share intimate information about themselves, including health information, and then share or sell this data to third parties.

Mozilla observed that anywhere from hundreds to tens of thousands of bits of user and device data were being sent out by these apps to third parties, most likely advertisers.

While it may be tempting to write these bots off as an unusual product for a niche audience, many of these chatbots market themselves as mental health tools and can prey on vulnerable users. We've already seen some tragic consequences from these types of bots, including instances where they encouraged self-harm and assassination attempts.

A lack of effective regulations only incentivises unsafe apps. Data is big business, and as long as we lack strong laws around privacy, we're going to keep seeing increasingly creative attempts to exploit our data.

RAFI ALAM

The gaps in the law letting businesses treat you unfairly

Have you found it hard to unsubscribe from a service you no longer want? Have you noticed supermarket products inexplicably shrinking while the price stays the same or even increases? Has the cost of your phone plan gone up, while new customers are offered better deals?

These are just some examples of business practices that are unfair, but not illegal. Late last year, in a joint submission, CHOICE joined other consumer advocates to call on the government to close gaps in Australian Consumer Law by introducing an unfair trade prohibition that would make such practices illegal.

While the government decides how to approach the regulation of unfair business practices, we'd like to hear from people who feel like they've been treated unfairly by a company. Share your story with us by emailing campaigns@choice.com.au.

YELENA NAM





New rules require telcos to protect customers in hardship

Telcos are now subject to an enforceable industry standard to ensure they better protect and support customers facing financial hardship.

Developed by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), the rules broaden the definition of financial hardship and compel telcos to offer customers in strife a minimum of six different financial hardship options, including payment plans.

"These new rules address a range of identified gaps in financial support for telco consumers," says ACMA chair Nerida O'Loughlin.

"Telcos must do a better job of identifying those in need of payment assistance and provide a stronger range of support options."



**Australian
Communications
and Media Authority**

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) CEO Andrew Williams welcomed the announcement.

"The release of the Industry Standard on Financial Hardship is a significant win for telco consumers struggling with bill stress during a cost of living crisis," he says. "The increased protections under the standard are a great step forward for consumer protections, and ACCAN looks forward to seeing the benefits that will come from the new rules."

JARNI BLAKKARLY



Mazda fined for giving consumers the run around on rights

Mazda has been ordered by the Federal Court to pay \$11.5 million in penalties after misleading nine separate customers about their rights. Mazda told customers they could only offer repairs, not refunds or replacements, despite multiple unsuccessful attempts to repair problems with the customers' vehicles. Mazda eventually offered only partial refunds or required "a significant payment" for a replacement. Mazda must also pay \$82,000 to each of the nine customers, and has undertaken to pay a further \$3000 per vehicle.

"The message to the new car industry is clear: substantial penalties can be imposed on businesses [that] misrepresent consumer guarantee rights," says ACCC deputy chair Catriona Lowe. "If a vehicle cannot be repaired within a reasonable time, or at all, consumers have a right under the Australian Consumer Law to a refund or replacement, and we expect car manufacturers to honour those rights promptly and without misleading consumers."

BRENDAN KEARNS

ASIC encourages Gen Z women to 'move past girl maths'

The corporate watchdog is urging young women to boost their financial literacy, warning social media trends like 'girl maths' are holding them back. ASIC issued the call after research by its Moneysmart education service found Generation Z women (those born 1997–2012) were more likely to be stressed and overwhelmed by money than men the same age.

"This is an issue further exacerbated by harmful stereotypes about young women and money," says Amanda Zeller, ASIC's acting senior executive leader of corporate finance. "These findings demonstrate the importance of empowering young women to move past 'girl maths' and take control of their finances."

'Girl maths', a social media trend that emerged last year, is described by ASIC as an "acrobatic way of rationalising spending". For example, proponents might argue a \$300 item actually costs you a dollar because you plan to use it every day of the year. ASIC says while the trend is rooted in some legitimate economic concepts, the way it discusses spending is not helping young women achieve financial security. ASIC says its Moneysmart website (moneysmart.gov.au) offers a range of resources to help women make informed financial decisions.

LIAM KENNEDY

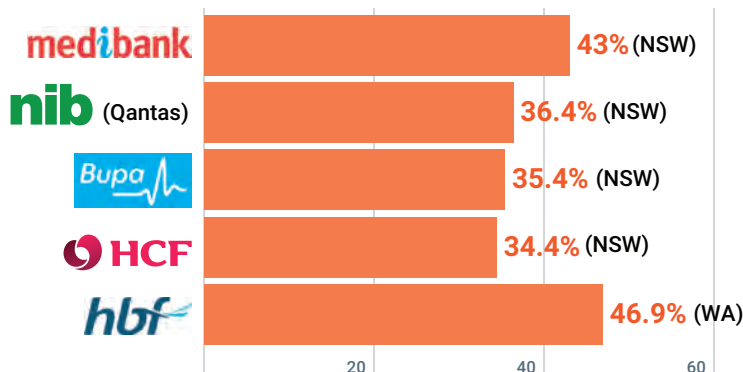


IMAGES GETTY



Insurers hiding soaring increases to top-level health cover

Health insurance premiums rose by an average 3.03% on 1 April, and for some people it will be even more. You may get a nasty shock when you get your health insurance bill this month, especially if you recently upgraded to a top-cover Gold policy. Currently-available Gold policies from the big funds have dramatically increased in price over the past three years – even before the most recent increase:



It's never too late to save on health insurance. There are very large differences between the most expensive and the cheapest policy with the same cover, so the best way is to shop around. There is no loyalty discount for staying with the same insurer, instead you're likely to end up paying more than you need to.

Can you help? If your health insurance premiums went up by more than the average 3.03%, we want to hear from you. Please email healthinsurance@choice.com.au and include the letter or email from your health fund.

UTA MIHM

Digital platforms must do more to protect consumers from scams

From buying a new pair of shoes to booking a hotel, so much of what we do now takes place online. Generally, this makes life easier, but with scam websites becoming increasingly sophisticated, it's almost impossible for consumers to tell them apart from the real thing. We're getting to the point where it's difficult to do anything online without worrying about or actually getting scammed.

Accommodation booking sites are among the platforms seeing a growth in scams. Reports to the ACCC about scams involving Booking.com increased almost 600% last year, and rental sites like Airbnb have also seen an increase in fake listings.

Digital platforms must do more to protect users from scams, instead of allowing scammers to use their websites and apps to steal money from consumers. However, it's clear these big tech companies, who have

the means and expertise to protect people from scams, won't do more unless the government makes them.

That's why CHOICE has welcomed the government's recent proposed obligations on digital platforms in relation to scams. But we believe the rules need to be stronger and backed by significant penalties to be effective.

The current proposed definition of a digital platform is much too narrow, and means websites such as Booking.com and Airbnb won't be covered. This leaves consumers exposed and confused – and without the protections against scams that are so clearly needed. Make your voice heard: choice.com.au/ScamsPetition.

ALEX SÖDERLUND



Stella Watson faced many hurdles when trying to access her late husband's superannuation.

First Nations consumers unable to access super

A whopping \$16 billion in lost or unclaimed superannuation is held across the super funds and the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). It's a massive issue and one that analysis by Super Consumers Australia and CHOICE shows disproportionately impacts postcodes with high populations of First Nations people.

Financial counsellors who work across remote First Nations communities say their clients often face frustrating barriers when trying to access the super their loved ones have left them. One major issue is identification – some super funds and the ATO don't accept the community-based ID cards often used by First Nations people in remote areas.

It can also be a battle for First Nations people to even find out what fund their loved one was with or how much super they had. Stella Watson, a Bardi Jawi and Nyikina woman living in Broome, spent three years trying to access her late husband super, which was just \$1600.

"The system is letting First Nations people down when it comes to lost super," says Super Consumers Australia policy manager Rebekah Sarkoezy. "First Nations people are the experts in their own needs, so we need to listen to them and the advocates calling for change." See the previous month's *CHOICE* magazine for more on this story.

DANIEL HERBORN

When a bank's not a bank

Ever heard of the Commercial Development Bank or Creditnet Bank Internationale? You can be forgiven for thinking they're banks, but in fact they're not. And it turns out that calling yourself a bank when you're not one is not really allowed. A recent court decision in a case brought by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) means the person behind the above-mentioned entities, one Robert Bruce Gray, will have to remove the word 'bank' from their names. He has also been prohibited from carrying on any actual banking business in Australia.



"APRA protects bank depositors through its licensing regime, prudential framework and active supervision," says APRA deputy chair Margaret Cole. "We have taken action once again to prevent Australians mistakenly believing they are depositing money with an APRA-regulated entity and receiving the same protections. We will continue to hold entities and individuals to account to ensure that Australians' financial interests are safe."

ANDY KOLLMORGEN



Can I pay with cash to avoid a surcharge?

It may come as a surprise to hear that businesses don't have to accept cash, but they do have to let you know this before you trade with them. It can be a sign or a verbal instruction but, as a WA Consumer Protection spokesperson puts it, "businesses can choose which payment types they accept".

The spokesperson also clarified the rules on credit card surcharges. "We know a lot of people like to pay with cash to avoid credit card surcharges. The good news is there are rules about this too. Card surcharges are permitted under the Australian Consumer Law; however, the fee must only reflect what it actually costs the business to process the payment, such as bank fees or terminal costs. If a business charges a payment surcharge, it must be able to prove the costs it is based on."

Surcharges also have to be included in the total advertised cost when a card is the only payment option. That means a \$5 coffee has to be advertised as a \$5.05 coffee when the surcharge is 1%.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN



Domestic airfares fall, but cancellations and delays remain high

Domestic airfares decreased by 13.4% between December 2022 and the end of last year, dropping to below pre-pandemic levels when adjusted for inflation.

“Travellers finally saw some relief from high airfares last year, which was consistent with cheaper jet fuel prices and slightly lower demand for domestic air travel,” says ACCC chair Gina Cass-Gottlieb. With new market entrant Bonza now competing with Qantas, Rex, and Virgin Australia on routes like Gold Coast–Melbourne, prices are decreasing.

“When more airline groups compete on a particular route, consumers benefit from lower fares,” Cass-Gottlieb says.

However, delays and cancellations are higher than normal. In December 2023, 5% of flights were cancelled, more than double the long-term average. And just 63.6% of flights arrived as scheduled, down from 81.1%. “The persistently high rates of cancellations and delays compared to long-term averages in the second half of last year were clearly disappointing for consumers,” Cass-Gottlieb says.

BRENDAN KEARNS



Everything Electric Everywhere

The Everything Electric show (au.everythingelectric.show/) is a worldwide travelling exhibition promoting the viability of renewable energy, with a focus on home solutions and electric vehicles (EVs).

CHOICE recently attended the Sydney show, which has expanded significantly from last year, with more EVs now available to buy locally. The latest models from Tesla, Polestar BMW, Audi and BYD were on display and available for a test drive.

But it wasn't all about futuristic cars that appear to have come off a Star Wars movie set. Some smaller

companies and EV enthusiasts showcased the possibility of transforming old classics into EVs. One of the more popular classic old cars to get the EV treatment was the Volkswagen Beetle, and two examples at the show highlighted the different ways these cars can be converted. One was transformed as part of a decades-long passion project, and the other was a commercial conversion, which many companies in Australia are

now able to do.

TIPS FOR TURNING A CLASSIC INTO AN EV

The car you choose must be light, ideally under 1800kg, and there must be room to accommodate the batteries without taking up too much usable space. Many EV conversion specialists have ‘off the shelf’ kits for Volkswagens with an air-cooled engine (like the Beetle), making this car particularly popular for EV enthusiasts.

To be eligible for conversion, the car must also not have a Controller Area Network (CAN) bus, which is a diagnostics system that can cause extra complications. Most cars produced before 1990 won't have this.

DENIS GALLAGHER





RANTS AND RAVES

Australians deserve a better super system

Once you finish your working life, you deserve the peace of mind to relax, spend time with loved ones and maybe tick a few things off your bucket list. Certainty around your retirement income would allow you to focus on living your best life.

The ideal retirement income system would be fair and easy to navigate. But, currently, our system is failing significantly on these fronts.

Super Consumers Australia's survey of over 1100 people aged 65 or older found that almost one in five of this demographic find it either 'fairly difficult' or 'very difficult' to get by on their income. The system broadly works well for those who own their home and have been building up super through their working life, but many people don't fall into that category.

The system isn't accommodating people with low super balances (including those who took career breaks to raise children or act as carers). Retired renters are also doing it tough, with almost half experiencing income poverty. Many women, First Nations people, disabled people and those who retired involuntarily are also disadvantaged by the system.

The government is looking into how to make the retirement income system work better, but it appears to only be focusing on how to help people manage their super. We need to think bigger than that. For instance, tweaking the super system won't help retirees who rent. Many experts and equality advocates have recognised



that Commonwealth Rent Assistance is inadequate and isn't keeping pace with rent increases. Similarly, we need system-wide solutions to ensure women's super balances don't keep falling further behind those of men.

The system's complexity also makes it difficult for people to get the most out of their retirement income.

The current tax and transfer system is hugely complicated, with a patchwork of interacting rules around income, assets and social security eligibility.

Australians who choose to return to work or work part-time after retiring while withdrawing some of their super encounter further complications; they need to open a new accumulation phase super account and pay two sets of fees.

Some turn to financial planners and tax professionals to cut through the complexity and rearrange their finances to maximise their retirement income. But sophisticated and personalised financial advice is simply too expensive for many.

One way to simplify the process would be for government departments to share more data. For example, the Australian Taxation Office could supply information on people's assets and income to make applying for the Age Pension an easier process.

A free and independent retirement guidance service could also make a difference. Different government departments have tools to help people navigate retirement, but they're spread out across various websites and aren't always easy to find. Simply bringing them together would streamline the process.

An independent quality test for retirement income products could also help. We have this while you're building up your super; why not when you're spending it? After all, providing retirement income is the whole point of the system.

You shouldn't have to become an expert on super, tax and social security to get the most out of your retirement income. Nor should the needs of large sections of the population be overlooked. Australians deserve a fairer system that works for everyone.

DANIEL HERBORN

You shouldn't have to become an expert on super, tax and social security to get the most out of your retirement income

ASK THE EXPERTS

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

Q Each year, I get quotes for my home building insurance from my current insurer, and three other insurers. My current insurer (AAMI) substantially increased my premium this year, but after getting the additional quotes I found I could not make any savings by taking out a policy with another insurer. I asked all the companies why my premiums had gone up so much, as I live in a low-risk Perth suburb.

RAC WA told me it was due to the

recent large number of claims for fires and floods, explaining that all policyholders had to make increased contributions, or the cost to risky policy holders would be too high. This seems unfair to me. Can you explain?

A CHOICE insurance expert Jodi Bird:

Insurance premiums are rising across the board due to higher costs for building materials and labour, and higher 're-insurance' costs, where the costs of natural disasters can impact all insurance premiums, as you note.

Ultimately, however, home insurance pricing is risk-based. The insurer decides how much your premium is, based on the risk you



ASK US

Email your question to asktheexperts@choice.com.au or write to Ask the Experts, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville, NSW 2204. You can also tap into the 'brains trust' at www.choice.community.

pose to claim. We think it's a cop-out on the insurer's behalf to say you have to pay more to subsidise people living in high-risk areas. The insurer is the one who decided to increase your premium to cover their costs in other areas, not the people living in those areas.

It also seems likely that AAMI has applied a 'loyalty penalty' to your premium (meaning they are charging you more than they would a new customer). We suggest you check the price rating on our online home insurance comparison to find less expensive insurers that you might not have obtained quotes from yet. It can pay to shop around.

Q I am looking at buying a new microwave, and as I have also been considering an air fryer, I thought I would look into buying one of the combination air fryer microwaves. Can you advise on how to choose a good one?

A CHOICE home economist Fiona

Mair: I think what you are referring to is a convection microwave with an air fryer mode. This is simply a cooking mode on a convection microwave that lets you brown and reheat frozen foods. If you're thinking of buying a model with this feature, I suggest you choose one that also comes with an air fryer basket (or be willing to buy one separately), as the feature isn't very effective without it. Our testing has also found that the air fryer function in a convection microwave doesn't perform as well as a standalone air fryer.

But I would also urge you to consider if you really need an air fryer (or specific air fryer function) and a convection microwave. Convection microwaves can microwave, grill

and oven bake, and can produce similar results to an air fryer, even without a dedicated air fryer mode. Alternatively, buying a standard microwave and a separate dedicated air fryer may be a cheaper option to consider. If you do decide to go with a convection microwave, you can read our review on page 44 for guidance on choosing the best model.





Q I recently bought a pre-packaged meal from the supermarket. I usually check ingredients but in this case I admit that I was taken in by the images of chickpeas, yellow split peas, spinach, red lentils and sweet potato on the packaging. It also stated the meal was “bursting with some of the healthiest, most natural ingredients”, including “superfoods”. I checked the ingredients list after I ate and was disappointed to see a long list of flavour enhancers and additives. Could this explain why I felt thirsty afterward? And the actual ‘healthy’ foods were in tiny quantities, like spinach (3%). Are there any rules around making these super healthy food claims when the food itself is anything but?

A CHOICE food and nutrition expert

Shadia Djakovic: You’re right in thinking it’s unethical to call a food healthy when it isn’t, but there are no regulations on calling food healthy, or using words like “superfoods” in the name of a food product. However, there are regulations on specific health claims, including ‘high in fibre’ or ‘contains fruit and vegetables which can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease’.

If the product had a low Health Star Rating and was marketing itself as healthy, then it may be worth lodging a complaint with the ACCC.

Most ready meals are highly processed, meaning they contain many types of additives, including those that imitate or enhance the sensory qualities of foods or culinary preparations made from foods. The end product is a food that should taste better and last longer, but many processed ingredients, including additives and preservatives, can have negative health implications.

Ready meals are also often high in sodium, which may explain the thirst you experienced. Check the nutrition label for sodium levels; a good guide is no more than 120mg of sodium per 100g (or 400mg per serving). Also check the vegetable content, regardless of the pictures on the pack.

We looked closely at supermarket ready meals for this issue and found that high sodium content and highly processed ingredients are very common. See p33 for more.



IMAGES GETTY

ASK THE EXPERTS



Q I have a question about businesses who don’t provide a way for customers to contact them. Last weekend we used a car park owned and operated by Drivo. When we left, the screen confirmed the time of entry and exit, which correctly indicated it was between three and four hours, and which had an advertised cost of \$20. But the payment screen at the gate showed \$28. As there was no means of communication with any car park attendant, we felt forced to accept the charge to exit.

After exiting, I decided to see if I could dispute the extra \$8 we were charged, but there is not a single contact detail available for Drivo anywhere – this includes on their website and the car park signs, and they don’t appear to be on social media. Their website only has an online form for hotels to request a demo of their car park system, and that form wouldn’t accept my details.

We are at a loss as to how a business like this is allowed to operate in Australia. I would appreciate your advice about how to deal with a business that is simply uncontactable!

A CHOICE customer service: Your frustration at this situation is totally justified. Unfortunately the Australian Consumer Law does not mandate that contact details be provided for consumer complaints.

However, under law, businesses must provide consumers with the ability to return faulty goods for repair, replacement or refund. And in the case of a recall, suppliers must provide details about what to do with recalled products and how to get a refund.

To find the contact details for an Australian business with a website, look them up on the Whois registry at whois.auda.org.au. It lists the names and email addresses of Australian business websites.

This search may reveal a parent company, whose contact details you can Google, or you can attempt to get in contact using the supplied email address. There’s no guarantee you’ll get a reply, but it’s a start.

If you’re unable to contact a company or business about an issue with a product or service you’ve purchased, the department of consumer affairs or fair trading in your state or territory can help. And if the business hasn’t provided you with sufficient information for you to enforce your rights under the ACL, that’s a case for the ACCC. ■

DRIVO