

Sense and sensibility: Aussie cricketers Chris Bertuch and Hamish Mackenzie with Deacon the seeing-eye dog. Picture: JASON EDWARDS



A touch of greatness

IN a fickle sport, these cricket players have never lost sight of their potential.

Standing tall at the crease each weekend, they have proved the only boundaries for the visually impaired are those hit square off the bat.

Nine Victorian Blind Cricket Association players will represent Australia in India this month at the world championships.

Team member Robert Mascitti said the Aussie squad was expected to do well, but would be tested against the traditional

rivals in India and Pakistan.

"The atmosphere at these events is electric," he said. "There is always so much support from spectators."

Blind cricket is modified to meet the needs of players who each have different levels of visual impairment.

The ball makes a noise when bowled, hit or thrown and the batsman relies on verbal alerts on how to attack each delivery.

"Spectators are often surprised by how fast pace the game is," Mr Mascitti said. "Though I sometimes wonder if the umpires are blind as well!"

He said the game had given many players greater confidence. "You really do notice the changes with people who get involved, and I'd like to think we might be encouraging others with visual impairments to have a go at anything."

Aaron Langmaid

\$150 increase looms in cost of health insurance

Pain in the premium

HEALTH insurance could be pushed out of reach for many people, advocates warn, as funds plan to lift premiums by \$150 a year.

The rise is expected from April, and industry sources warn funds will ask the Federal Government to approve premium increases of at

Sue Dunlevy

Health funds must submit applications for a premium rise to the Government by tomorrow — and they say it is hard to see how the rise could be less than 5 per cent, given that private-health inflation is running at 9 per cent.

chief Carol Bennett said such an increase would make health insurance too expensive for many people.

"It's another slug on consumers already trying to cope with high out-of-pocket costs," she said.

Before Health Minister Tanya Plibersek approved

become the baseline premium for a major policy change in 2014 that will see the Government cease increasing the 30 per cent private-health insurance tax rebate in line with health-fund premium rises.

Last month in its mini-Budget, the Government

gradually erode the value of the private-health insurance rebate and increase out-of-pocket expenses for consumers.

The proposed 5 per cent premium rise will be more than twice the rate of inflation. In the year to September, the consumer price

Industry sources question whether the Government should continue to approve premium rises now that it plans to tie increases in the 30 per cent rebate to the inflation rate.

Australia already has some of the highest out-of-pocket costs for health in the world.