

COUNTRY HOSPITAL CRISIS

Rural doctor resigns from Clinical Senate following Government plan to downgrade rural hospitals

Following the release of the South Australian Country Health Care Plan on 5 June, the inaugural Chair of the South East Clinical Senate and a rural SA doctor for 15 years, Dr David Senior, has resigned from the Senate, saying he feels betrayed at the way the plan has been developed—with virtually no genuine consultation with country doctors or the communities they serve.

With 33 years experience as a doctor, Dr Senior practises in the SA rural communities of Robe, Kingston and Lucindale. Clinical Senates were established by the SA Government to enable clinicians to provide their views on health policy in the state.

“I feel betrayed by Department of Health bureaucrats who had previously pretended to consult with GPs and with the Clinical Senate over this plan, yet had kept the most important points of it hidden” Dr Senior said. “I strongly believe the Clinical Senate, a body of clinicians and bureaucrats, was misled by so-called consultations over the last few months.

“The plan was released by Minister Hill very sneakily on the night the State Budget was released, and just before a long weekend. The day after the long weekend, the bureaucrats were all busily reassuring the public about the plan, even before we’d had a chance to evaluate it fully—they already had power-point presentations prepared and were obviously working in damage-control mode right from the start.

“Despite subsequent reassurances from Department of Health bureaucrats over the past week, this plan is quite clear in its intention to downgrade hospitals at Kingston, Penola and Bordertown to ‘bandaid centres’ over the next ten years. This will also put extra pressure on the other hospitals in the region.

“Kingston Hospital, which has recently been transformed into a ‘Multi-Purpose Service’, may be temporarily protected for the next two years because of that transformation. But this is a ten year plan which is quite clear in its intention to reduce services in 43 small towns across the state, including Kingston.

“I strongly recommend that all country South Australians evaluate the plan themselves and communicate their views to the Health Minister. This is not a doctor’s issue—it is an issue for everyone who lives, works, travels through and holidays in country areas, and may at some time need urgent medical attention. People should download the plan from www.health.sa.gov.au and see for themselves exactly what is at stake here.

“I urge all country South Australians—and any city-based South Australians who holiday in the state’s rural areas—to attend a rally at Parliament House on Wednesday 18 June 2008 at 1pm to express their opposition to the plan and to urge the Government to suspend the plan.

“Minister Hill is making much about ‘putting new services into the country’ but he is only putting them into the ‘hub’ hospitals – for example, Mount Gambier in the Southeast – at the expense of all the small towns.

“Rural doctors’ aims are first to maintain the cost-effective and highly valued local inpatient services that are currently in place at all the 43 small hospitals affected, and then review with the Government which and how many hospitals should be hub hospitals.

“Rather than seeking to downgrade rural hospitals, I urge the Government to instead introduce much-needed rural health workforce supports and further develop and resource Clinical Networks to achieve better health outcomes for rural South Australians.

“I also urge the Government to get behind a national Rural Health Obligation which would set, once and for all, the proper standard of access to local rural hospitals, rural doctors and rural health services that country South Australians *really* deserve.”

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