

Media release  
Wednesday 25 June 2008

## **Come clean on Country Health Care Plan, Minister — rural doctors call for straight 'yes' or 'no' answers**

The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) is urging the SA Minister for Health, John Hill MP, to come clean on exactly what the SA Government's Country Health Care Plan means for the future of rural hospital services across the state, following the Minister's denials on ABC Radio that he will be closing hospitals, reducing emergency care and reducing acute care in the country.

**RDASA is calling on Minister Hill to issue a media release today with straight 'yes' or 'no' answers to key questions about the future of rural hospital services under the Plan (see the questions below).**

Mr Hill was quoted on ABC Radio Online yesterday as saying of the groups opposing the Plan: "I haven't put out the plan that they're objecting to, I'm not closing hospitals, I'm not reducing emergency care, I'm not reducing acute care in the country, that's what they're saying I'm doing, none of those things are true."

This is despite the fact that the SA Government's Country Health Care Plan clearly proposes to downgrade 43 rural hospitals across South Australia, including removing acute care and inpatient capability at these hospitals, downgrading emergency capability to little more than a basic first aid service, and removing obstetric services in many of the rural hospitals providing obstetric care.

"How can the Minister say on ABC Radio that he is not reducing emergency and acute care in rural South Australia, when quite clearly he proposes to?" RDASA President, Dr Steve Holmes, said.

"We don't think the rural South Australians who live in the 43 affected communities will believe the Minister when they are forced to travel in many cases hundreds of kilometres to receive the acute care they currently receive locally for serious injuries and conditions. Will they really see this as being an increase in emergency and acute care for their community?"

"When a pregnant woman is turned away from her local hospital at the onset of labour—because that hospital is no longer allowed to provide obstetric care—and told to drive two hours to the next closest hospital, will she really believe health services in her area are better than they were before?"

"And will rural South Australians really consider they have better access to healthcare in their community when their local doctors and nurses leave town because there is no longer a local hospital enabling them to provide the full range of clinically appropriate services needed by their community?"

"We don't think so, Minister."

"The Minister may not technically be *closing* hospitals, but after the Government is finished with them under this Plan they will be nothing more than carcasses of buildings providing little more than aged care, basic first aid and basic primary healthcare—and that's if there are enough doctors, nurses and other health professionals who choose to stay in the affected communities should the Plan be implemented in its current form! In all reality, the affected hospitals will be more like community halls under this Plan."

"Given the Minister is so sure he is not closing hospitals, not reducing emergency care and not reducing acute care in our country communities, it will be easy for him to issue a media statement providing a direct 'yes' or 'no' answer to the following simple questions."

“Under the SA Country Health Care Plan:

- will all existing acute care beds be retained completely — and continue to be funded at least at the level they are currently, with that funding increased annually in line with medical cost inflation or greater — at all SA rural hospitals currently providing acute care, at least for the entire period the SA Labor Government maintains office?
- will all SA rural hospitals currently providing inpatient services for more than 24 hours when required on clinical grounds continue to be able to provide this service, at least for the entire period the SA Labor Government maintains office?
- will all existing emergency care capability be retained completely at all SA rural hospitals currently providing emergency care, at least for the entire period the SA Labor Government maintains office?
- will all SA rural hospitals currently providing 24-hour emergency medical services continue to be able to provide these 24-hour services at all these locations, using locally-based doctors, nurses, paramedics and other health professionals, at least for the entire period the SA Labor Government maintains office?
- will all existing obstetric care capability be retained completely at all SA rural hospitals currently providing obstetric care, at least for the entire period the SA Labor Government maintains office?
- will any rural hospitals across South Australia be downgraded in any way, or have a reduction in the services they provide locally, under this Plan and/or under the SA Labor Government?

“We look forward to the Minister coming clean on the SA Country Health Care Plan by providing straight ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses to these important questions.

“At the end of the day, rural doctors and country communities would like to work with Minister Hill and his Department in a genuine, transparent and constructive process to ensure a strong future for rural hospitals, rural health services and the rural health workforce in South Australia. The first step in doing this, however, is for Minister Hill to can this Plan.”

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