

Media release — Wednesday 18 June 2008

Minister unable to answer country health plan questions

Many hundreds gather at protest rally

The SA Minister for Health, John Hill MP, has missed a deadline set by the Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) for answers to a series of questions put by the Association seeking the specific evidence and research underpinning the SA Country Health Care Plan.

In other developments today relating to the country hospitals crisis in South Australia:

- RDASA is **questioning the accuracy of the number of *currently available* rural hospital acute beds reported in the plan**, saying a count of acute beds in the Mallee-Coorong region this week shows there are 26% *fewer* beds in that region alone than the plan reports there are. This raises serious questions about the credibility of the plan, and about the cost savings the Government believes it could make under the plan (savings which RDASA believes will not be forthcoming anyway, when the inevitable blow-out in costs of transporting many more rural patients to distant hospitals by road or air ambulance is taken into account).
- **Many hundreds of South Australians travelled from across the state—including from locations hundreds of kilometres away from Adelaide—to attend a public rally outside Parliament House in Adelaide** to voice their strong protest at the devastating impact of the Government's proposed plan to shut-down much-needed hospital inpatient services and threaten the provision of 24-hour emergency services in 43 rural communities across the state.
- Despite Minister Hill emphasising on Radio 5AA this morning that rural nurses are not being gagged in talking to the media about the plan, **RDASA has documentary evidence of directives provided to some rural hospital staff not to make comment to the media about implementation of the plan.**

"The fact that Minister Hill has not supplied answers to our questions within the week's deadline we had set begs the question — if the proposed plan to downgrade 43 rural hospitals and 12 community hospitals in South Australia is based on firm research and evidence, why can't the Minister's Department provide the answers to our questions within a week? Surely this evidence would be immediately at hand?" RDASA Vice President and President of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA), Dr Peter Rischbieth, said.

"These important questions sought to ascertain things like:

- what clinical criteria have been applied to the decision-making underpinning the plan?
- what clinical determinations have been used to describe the minimum service levels that should be provided in rural hospitals under the plan?
- what economic modelling has been used to demonstrate the capacity to reallocate health funding to *increase* health services to rural patients?
- what objective evidence has been utilised in planning for the clinical care of patients and the impact on the rural health workforce under the plan?
- what nursing staffing ratio and nursing profile will the plan rely on for caring for aged care and emergency presentations to rural health units?
- what costings have been developed under the plan regarding the transfer of more rural patients to distant hospitals or using retrieval teams from metropolitan hospitals?

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“Our 11 questions to the Minister can be found on the front page of our website at www.rdasa.com.au.

“If the proposed plan to downgrade 43 rural hospitals across South Australia is based on solid evidence and research, rather than being something simply dreamed up by city-based bureaucrats, surely our questions could easily have been answered within the week allocated.

“We are becoming more and more concerned each day about the quality of research and evidence underpinning this plan. For example, in just one health service region alone—the Mallee-Coorong region—the plan states that 127 acute beds are currently available in the region’s rural hospitals. However, an audit undertaken of available acute hospital beds in the region last week found there are only 94 acute beds available. Multiply these sorts of errors across more of the affected communities and you already have a lot less acute beds in SA’s rural hospitals than the Government believes there are. Additionally, if these acute beds were to be closed, RDASA has serious doubts that the 12 Community Hospitals and 4 Regional Hospitals would have sufficient resources to look after the extra patients that would flow to them.

“We are also very concerned that in some sections of the plan indicating what services will be available at the so-called GP Plus Emergency Centres, the provision of 24-hour emergency response services is omitted. Not providing emergency capability at these centres **would put lives at risk**. We have been assured that the omission of this service twice in the plan is a typographical error — however, we ask the Minister to **formally clarify in writing** that all GP Plus Emergency Centres would retain full 24-hour emergency response capability under the plan, and would utilise local doctors, nurses and ambulance officers.

“The Minister also stated unequivocally on Radio 5AA this morning that no rural nurses or other health professionals are being gagged in speaking with the media about the plan and the detrimental effect it will have on the hospitals in which they work. We don’t know where the Minister is getting this advice from, because we have **documentary evidence** of some rural hospital staff being directed not to comment on the plan. We hope the Minister is simply misguided on this point rather than being misleading—but it does beg the question, if the Minister has been misguided on this aspect of the crisis, it is quite possible he has been misguided by his Department on the plan itself.

“At the end of the day, this issue is about rural communities and rural health services, not about doctors. It is about the right of rural patients to access hospital care and healthcare locally. After all, rural South Australians pay taxes for these essential local services. The fact that many hundreds of South Australians attended the protest rally at short notice outside Parliament House in Adelaide today—and that many of them travelled hundreds of kilometres to do so—demonstrates the community uproar that is forming around this plan.

“The strong community sentiment is also demonstrated by the fact that over 1200 people have already signed on to a Facebook page on the issue—visit www.facebook.com and search for ‘Save our Country Hospitals’ under the group search facility.

“Today’s rally brought together many organisations including the Rural Doctors Association of South Australia, AMA South Australia, Women in Agriculture and Business of South Australia, the Country Women’s Association of South Australia, and Health Consumers of Rural and Remote Australia. There are also numerous rallies being organised in rural towns across the state.

“In short, this is a plan which threatens the very future of rural communities across South Australia, and all rural South Australians—as well as all those who visit or holiday in country areas of the state—should be very worried about what this plan will mean for them should they become seriously ill, be involved in an accident, or need basic primary healthcare.

“The only responsible thing for Minister Hill to do is to withdraw the plan immediately.”

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