

Media release -- Tuesday 24 June 2008

Minister fails to justify the downgrading of 43 country hospitals

The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) says it is “profoundly disappointed with the extreme lack of detail” in answers provided by SA Health Minister, John Hill MP, to specific questions put by the Association regarding the SA Government’s Country Health Care Plan—adding the answers fail to support or justify the downgrading of 43 rural hospitals across the State.

RDASA has also taken issue with the Minister’s inference that country doctors were actively consulted on the proposed Plan to downgrade the hospitals, arguing the consultations referred to by the Minister only covered the rollout of primary healthcare and made no mention of the Plan’s real intent of proposed rural hospital downgrades.

The Plan in its current form proposes closing acute medical inpatient care at 43 rural hospitals across South Australia, forcing patients to travel hundreds of kilometres in many cases—either in their own vehicles or by expensive air or road ambulance—to access the same level of care they currently receive locally.

“On 10 June, we sought a formal response from Minister Hill regarding the precise clinical criteria, modelling, research and evidence used to underpin the Plan and the Government’s claims that it will deliver better access to health care for rural South Australians” RDASA Vice President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, said.

“We requested that the Minister provide a detailed written response to our 11 questions within 7 days. Not only did the Minister miss our deadline, but when he provided the answers they were superficial and lacked specific information about the evidence and research the Government claims underpins the Plan.

“The Minister also provided a summary of consultations he claims have been undertaken regarding the Plan and, by inference, the Government’s proposal to close down acute care at 43 rural hospitals across the state. This is certainly news to us!

“It appears that doctors and other stakeholders were meant to read between the lines and assume that consultations specifically undertaken around primary healthcare really were consultations around the downgrading of 43 rural hospitals! It would have been useful to know this at the time.

“All doctors and other stakeholders we have spoken to have confirmed our understanding that there was never any specific mention made of the proposed downgrades during these consultations. Indeed, a number of consultations I attended personally—and which were noted by the Minister in his response to us as being consultations on the wider intent of the Plan—were no such thing. The Government’s intent to downgrade the 43 rural hospitals was simply not raised at these consultations.

“Additionally, the rural clinical consultants to Country Health SA and senior rural doctors we have spoken to who attended meetings of the Rural Doctors Liaison Forum—which the Minister also informed us were consultation forums for the Plan—have stated they were not aware of the Government’s proposal to downgrade the 43 hospitals until the Plan was made public on budget day!

“Either the Minister is being misleading or he is being misled by his Department.

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“The Minister has offered to provide us with information which he claims contributed to the decision-making around the Plan. We strongly take up his offer in this regard, as this will enable us to assess exactly how much and what type of empirical data, clinical guidelines and research this Plan is based on.

“We want to see the hard data on which the Government is claiming this Plan is based. We have also replied to the Minister, again asking him to provide detailed, specific information to our original questions.

“As I have said before, this Plan has real potential to deliver a devastating king-hit to 43 rural hospitals in South Australia, increase the caseload pressure on the remaining hospitals, and lead to the rapid loss of doctors and nurses from those 43 rural communities.

“A plan which has the potential to do this much damage is far too important to be based simply on political whim—it must be backed by hard evidence which is provided publicly and transparently, and is *clearly linked* to the specific claims made by the Government.

“We don't need more generalised answers and motherhood statements about this Plan—we need to see specifically what research, evidence, guidelines and data have been relied upon in its development.”

See the 11 questions put to Minister Hill and the response from the Minister to those questions at www.rdasa.com.au (see the front page).

**Available for interview — RDASA President, Dr Steve Holmes, on 0428 421 000 and RDASA Vice President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, on 0408 813 143
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