

Media release -- Tuesday 10 June 2008

Rural doctors put key questions to Minister on rural hospital downgrades plan

The Rural Doctors Association of South Australia (RDASA) met this afternoon with SA Health Minister, John Hill MP, regarding the SA Government's Country Health Care Plan and its reassessment of the provision of hospital and healthcare services in up to 43 rural communities across South Australia.

RDASA President, Dr Steve Holmes and RDASA Vice President, Dr Peter Rischbieth, also provided the Minister with 11 questions from which they are seeking detailed answers—within 7 days—regarding precisely what clinical criteria, modelling, research and evidence has been used to underpin the proposed plan.

“The plan put forward by the State Government and the Minister last week is far too important to be based simply on political whim” said Dr Rischbieth, who is also President of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia. “If the Government proposes to make changes to the provision of hospital and health services in up to 43 South Australian rural communities and their surrounding districts, it is essential people in those communities can assess the firm evidence and criteria on which the changes are based.

“We appreciated being able to meet with the Minister today as part of our regular program of quarterly meetings with him. We communicated our strong concern to him that the proposed plan will have major implications for the provision of adequate health services for rural patients and also the many South Australians who holiday, visit relatives, invest and operate businesses in those rural communities.

“We fear that rather than expanding services for rural South Australians, the proposed plan will mean that—in many cases—where previously they were able to stay in their own communities for treatment, they now will have to travel long distances to regional hospitals or Adelaide for treatment. This is particularly the case for inpatient care. At the moment, patients are able to receive comprehensive care in the 43 rural hospitals. But under the plan, these hospitals may not be allowed to look after inpatients, so anybody who needs observation or further treatment will have to either drive hundreds of kilometres to the nearest major hospital or be taken there by air or road ambulance—at great cost to them and taxpayers. Patients' families will also need to relocate to these distant centres along with the patients themselves.

“The strong reliance on retrieval services and bigger hospitals to meet the additional demand caused by this plan is of great concern, given they are already struggling under the weight of their current patient load. In many cases, caring for patients at their local hospital can be much more cost-effective than sending them elsewhere. Having emergency capability in rural communities also means that lives are not being put at risk when retrieval services—particularly air retrieval—cannot pick up critically ill patients because of competing priorities and inclement weather.

“The proposed plan could see up to 43 hospitals replaced by little more than observation or first aid posts, which will have a devastating impact on the ability of local doctors, nurses and other health professionals to provide immediate life-saving care for farming and road accidents and the like. Some rural doctors have already indicated they will leave their towns if the plan is implemented in its current form, as they don't believe they would be able to provide adequate care to their patients under the new regime.

“We indicated to the Minister this afternoon that we are willing to work with Country Health SA on the issues raised by the proposed plan, however before we enter into discussions with them we need to know exactly what data, research and clinical criteria they are basing this plan on. We also need to know whether the Government is genuine in wanting to consult with country communities and country health professionals, or whether the plan will simply be rolled out after the short consultation period ends in six weeks time, regardless of the concerns expressed by rural communities and rural health professionals across South Australia.”

See the 11 questions put to SA Health Minister, John Hill MP, 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. RDAA media contact, Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890.