

**Submission
No 225**

**THE SAFETY AND QUALITY OF HEALTH SERVICES PROVIDED BY NORTHERN
BEACHES HOSPITAL**

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NSW PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE NORTHERN BEACHES HOSPITAL

A Personal Perspective

Sadly the former NSW LNP Government and local Liberal MPs including Rob Stokes, Member for Pittwater and Brad Hazzard, Member for Wakehurst and Minister for Health, played a big part in lumbering us, the Northern Beaches community and the current NSW Government, with a hospital contract that so far appears to be unbreakable. There are apparently no out clauses. I regularly wrote to Rob Stokes appealing against the location of the hospital and more importantly the public/private partnership. I was involved in supporting the nurses in demonstrating outside the Forestville hospital site before its construction. We, the silent majority, were ignored. I challenged Rob Stokes on the very hurried and 'deliberate' demolition of Mona Vale Hospital but he ignored this as well.

I am still concerned to ascertain why certain influential clinicians supported the establishment of the Northern Beaches Hospital at Frenchs Forest and also whether they also supported the public/ private model. I campaigned openly on Facebook and through regular letters to Rob Stokes and the once available print edition of the Manly Daily. I was only one of many who fought to Save Mona Vale Hospital. It is a shame that Dr Suzanne Daly has not been honoured for her gutsy fight and for the petition to Save Mona Vale Hospital that Rob Stokes sat on for many months before presenting to a nearly empty chamber of the Legislative Assembly.

Had Rob Stokes supported the petition we might not be in the situation we are today and yes lives may have been saved. I for one will never forget or forgive for the way the Northern Beaches Hospital was established.

Some Background and Concerns

Mona Vale and Manly public hospitals and their replacement with the Northern Beaches Hospital has sparked significant debate regarding the availability of public hospital beds in the region. While the Northern Beaches Hospital was built to provide more modern facilities and a broader range of services, concerns have been raised about the actual impact on public hospital bed capacity.

The Northern Beaches Hospital, which opened in 2018, was designed to serve as a major healthcare hub for the area, but it operates as a privately managed public hospital under a public-private partnership. This structure has led to questions about whether the transition resulted in a net loss of public hospital beds, as the hospital has a mixed capacity, with a significant portion of its beds allocated to private patients.

According to available statistics, the overall number of public hospital beds in the Northern Beaches region has indeed been affected. Before the new hospital was built, we were told that Mona Vale and Manly hospitals had a combined total of approximately 180 beds for public patients. The actual figure was closer to 300 beds.

The **bed count** at Mona Vale and Manly hospitals was, to my knowledge, closer to 100 to 150 beds each, depending on the reporting criteria used by the NSW Department of Health. This would mean the combined total for both hospitals were around 200 to 300 beds for public patients before the opening of the Northern Beaches Hospital. My concern is that the Northern Beaches Hospital, while offering a larger overall capacity (around 450 beds), has fewer beds dedicated to public patients, with some sources suggesting around 60% of beds are available for public use and the rest allocated to private patients. This shift in allocation has led to concerns about a net loss of public hospital beds in the region, especially given that the older hospitals (Mona Vale and Manly) were both operating as public facilities. In my view, the health authorities and local Members of Parliament including the former Minister for Health were in my view reticent to disclose actual bed numbers. A range of 100 to 150 for each hospital is again, in my view, not telling the truth.

The closure of these hospitals and **the transition to the Northern Beaches Hospital likely did result in a reduction in the number of public beds available locally**, which has raised questions about healthcare access, particularly for Northern Beaches residents who rely on public healthcare services. This is something I would expect the Parliamentary Inquiry to examine. Are there fewer beds specifically dedicated to public patients? The mixed model of operation, with its emphasis on private care, appears to have resulted in fewer beds for public patients, raising concerns about equitable access to healthcare for the local population.

In 2020, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) highlighted that the Northern Beaches Hospital's capacity for public patients was not necessarily a net increase, but rather a reallocation of services, with the public sector beds falling short of the previous combined total of Mona Vale and Manly hospitals. As a result, there has been concern that the closure of these older facilities has led to a reduction in access to public healthcare for local residents, particularly for those who rely on public services and are unable or unwilling to pay for private care.

Another question that the local community wants answered is **what public hospital services were downgraded or lost after the closure of the Mona Vale and Manly Hospitals?** I wrote to Rob Stokes, former Member for Pittwater on numerous occasions before and after the closing of the surgical and emergency services at Mona Vale Hospital. I never once received satisfactory answers about the public health services that had been lost as a result of the changeover. It was clear to me that there was no real concern shown by the then Minister for Health, Brad Hazzard about what most locals saw as a loss of public bed numbers, emergency and surgical and other health services.

As a former Mona Vale Hospital patient, I am aware that the Health Department closed the APAC nursing services that had operated successfully at Mona Vale Hospital for years. I had received home nursing from APAC nurses on quite a number of occasions to monitor and treat cellulitis. I also visited the APAC clinic at Mona Vale Hospital to receive intravenous antibiotic treatment. I

understand that home nursing services now operate out of the Royal North Shore Hospital. I am not aware whether such a public service is provided by the Northern Beaches Hospital. This is no doubt because it is a privately owned and operated business not catering for the community needs once provided by the two local public hospitals. I am sure there are many similar examples of a loss of public hospital services.

I am not aware whether NSW Health agencies are gathering information on the delivery of public hospital services at the Northern Beaches Hospital but if it is not collected then the community is not being adequately served. One thing that is clear is that I have never seen any information or promotion of the Northern Beaches Hospital as being a provider of public hospital services. Without the promotion of the available health services, how is the community to know what services are available?

From my own personal experience as an inpatient on three occasions in the past three years I am more than satisfied with my treatment. On another occasion I was treated in Emergency and discharged in the late evening after receiving excellent treatment and service. I found the staff, despite being overworked, were caring and efficient in treating me.

As a patient I did observe that the hospital and particularly nursing staff were overworked. I also recall that when I left in April 2024 there were 20 patients waiting for beds. During my stay it became obvious that the Northern Beaches Hospital attracts patient from well beyond the Northern Beaches. In conversations with patients, I also observed that private patients come from not only Northern Sydney and the North Shore but further afield.

As a member of the local community, I can attest to the fact that I know very little about what is contained in the contract governing the delivery of public hospital services by the Northern Beaches Hospital's owners, Healthscope. This information has been kept secret. I don't know whether the secrecy relates to Cabinet confidentiality or because of a 'commercial in confidence' agreement.

Only those who hold positions of power in the Health Department and Northern Sydney Local Health District know whether the Northern Beaches Hospital

Public Private Partnership is achieving efficient service delivery. I am concerned though that the former NSW Government was responsible for shrouding arrangements for the Northern Beaches Hospital in secrecy no doubt to avoid any criticism.

The recent announcement about the failure of Healthscope to come to terms with a number of health funds must be seen as a major concern. How does this impact on the provision of health services to public patients? It seems that this private hospital is struggling to either make ends meet or is it to meet the profit levels and returns expected by shareholders or management. It is obvious that business and profit are driving how the hospital is run. This 'must' impact on the provision of local public health services!

We are at a point today where it is clear that the previous State Government's dream for a new model of public private partnership was instead a nightmare for the Northern Beaches community. The previous State Government ignored earlier models like the Port Macquarie Hospital which had been a failure yet they still pursued a similar model. It was only after establishment of the Northern Beaches Hospital that the plans for further public private partnerships across New South Wales were abandoned.

Some Serious Points for Consideration and Resolution

The Northern Beaches needs a public hospital providing the same level of public hospital services as similar hospitals across in New South Wales. It cannot be ignored that the Northern Beaches has a population of around 270,000 people but that its catchment is much wider well into the North Shore and even beyond.

The Northern Beaches may not be receiving the same level of public hospital services or have the number of public beds available as do similar sized local Government areas. What services public health hospital services are not being currently provided and why?

The demand for beds by outside private and possibly public patients, is in my view, impacting seriously on the limited number of beds for local Northern

Beaches patients and that includes public beds. This must be examined.

The New South Wales Government must seriously consider taking over the operation of the Northern Beaches hospital to ensure that public hospital services are provided to Northern Beaches residents.

The fact remains that the Northern Beaches of Sydney does not at this time have a fully-fledged Public Hospital.

Mark Horton

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