

**Submission
No 191**

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Miss Alison Pearson
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To whom it may concern,

I wish to make a submission supporting Roy Butlers call for experiences in health care in western NSW. While there are various reasons that people from this area will write in, I would like to focus this submission on what are seemingly basic areas of health that include maternity, paediatrics and emergency care.

I will start by saying I am a new mother with private health from Cobar NSW. I am gainfully employed (currently on maternity leave) and fund all my health care needs off of a single income. Throughout my adult life I have travelled around and lived in other rural centres, large towns and even capital cities. I have engaged in both public and private health over this time with varying levels of care. This submission is by no means a "shot" at the medical professionals working in Cobar. I am a firm believer that the people we have working here have the drive and skills beyond the equipment and resources they are armed with. I speak on their behalf as much as us as patients.

My experience is based in 2019/20 but has affected families in our town since the almost total removal of birthing and child services so long ago I can't even remember.

My story begins with a need to visit a specialist for concerns on endometriosis. We have a specialist who comes to town who sent me to Dubbo for relevant testing including ultrasound. This involves a 6 hour round trip and time off of work just for testing. The results of the test concluded I would need surgery, however, the findings would require both a gynaecologist and general surgeon and I would be required to travel to Orange as there wasn't anyone who performed this in Dubbo. I got another referral and a now faced a 10 hour round trip for initial consultation. And further travel, time off work, food and accommodation for the surgery.

During this period, I became pregnant and due to the nature of my condition, I opted to stay with the private gynaecologist. This now involved 10 hour round trips monthly for check ups, 6 hour round trips monthly for ultrasounds in Dubbo and various blood tests - some of which could be performed in Cobar, some in Dubbo. This means a minimum of 3 days off work, overnight stays and a minimum of around 1500km travel per month. While it's fair that I chose to engage this doctor and could choose see the original referring OBGYN who came to town - I would still have to travel 600km round trips for ultrasound to provide her with the information she needed for basic consults. This was honestly just ridiculous. The cost of the birth of my child sky rocketed into the thousands and while he is worth every cent, it makes you question what the cost comparison would be to those living in an urban area. Not to mention any antenatal concerns outside of these visit or cause to present for medical attention were met with little options but further referrals and travel.

After a bout of concerning bleeding during my pregnancy, I was told that the local team were only able to check my baby using a hand held Doppler and had no one on staff at that time that with extensive experience to do any kind of internal examination. That I would be referred to Bourke (a 320km round trip) the following day for an urgent ultrasound as I was too early in my pregnancy for the Doppler to be truly accurate. Upon calling Bourke I was told they were booked out and that I could sit in the waiting room for an opening anywhere between 9-5 to be ready at short notice with a full bladder for the entire time. I took this option, drove there and waited. The technician was overloaded and not impressed to be fitting me in. Upon examination, I was told that my baby had not survived. He then chose to look further and

decided that the results were not as bleak - but still inconclusive. He encouraged me to go to Dubbo or Orange in 2 weeks and be retested. On the way home, flood waters rerouted our trip, resulting in several delays to go via Nyngan. Road blocks left me on the roadside, with my inconclusive results, still bleeding.

Thankfully, after a gruelling and emotional few weeks, my next trip was a happy one having an ultrasound and OBGYN visit in Orange. My baby had survived. My consults continued over the coming months as scheduled racking up the kms for routine check ups. In my 34th week, I received further inconclusive testing resulting in my OBGYN requesting that I move closer to antenatal healthcare incase I needed emergency delivery. If I chose to stay in Cobar, I would face being flown to Dubbo for delivery and if any emergencies arose, that waiting for air services may be detrimental. So I packed up and headed to Orange. Leaving my job and home 6 weeks early with no income to wait it out.

Thankfully the precautions paid off and my child was delivered safely in Orange after 34 days away from home, staying in a combination of private family homes and paid accommodation. While IPTAAS is helpful towards expenses, it in no way covered it totally. You are assessed to receive a km rate for fuel and a per day rate for accommodation. I was grateful to receive the fuel benefit which would cover my tank on most trips but the accommodation portion was far from covered. IPTAAS will provide you \$20 per night for you and an escort in private accommodation and \$30 each in paid accommodation. This means you can get \$60 a night towards rooms that cost \$150 a night plus. Helpful but not enough. Helpful but definitely not enough to cover my lost wages. Helpful but not enough that I wasn't left thousands of dollars worse off.

The next part of my story involves health services in Trangie NSW and Narromine NSW. At 2 weeks old, my child became ill whilst staying in Trangie. The local GP was booked out and couldn't fit us in but a GP at Narromine (who was also fully booked) was happy to squeeze us in due to my babies age. Consultation there had us referred to Dubbo Hospital ED to have a thorough check up that couldn't be performed locally. The referral to a bigger centre was no surprise but the treatment in Dubbo is where I was amazed.

The hospital ED took us in immediately. My baby was sent for IMMEDIATE ultrasound with INSTANT results. He was then met within half a hr by an experienced paediatrician. During this consult, his condition worsened with the paediatrician reacted very quickly placing a canuela in this tiny baby and ordering bloods, some of which had INSTANT results. I hadn't seen anything like it in Cobar. All tests were right there and some results instant to allow them to help my child straight away. We were then admitted with nothing but a nappy bag and the clothes I had on my back and were treated by an amazing team. They made sure we were both taken care of and that I too was fed, cleaned and had access to wash my clothing until more could be sourced. They sent for more tests on my son and he was made comfortable for the entire stay. Apart from the speed the really shocking part of our hospitalisation? The number of comments from medical staff, family and friends that were to the effect of "thank god you weren't at home when this happened". When I asked why (knowing the answer) I was told by several people that while the local hospital definitely would've looked after us, that my child would've ended up being flown out from Cobar or in a road ambulance if we presented at Trangie hospital and that with babies, time is critical. That my child had them worried for a period but thankfully having a paediatrician and resources on hand meant acting quickly - which prevented a common virus from being potentially fatal. That, in this case, speed was of critical importance. It pains me to

think that - compared to a city hospital - Dubbo would still be considered to be under equipped. But that here they were providing treatment I could only dream of in my home town and were saving my child's life.

While I'm grateful for my outcome in both situations, the nerves at taking my child home were intense. To be scared to come back to the place I live and love, just incase my child were to get sick again and not have the advantage of speed that may save his life is terrifying.

This is where people will say "you choose where you live". And yes, that's true. I choose to live in a rural and isolated town full of wonderful people, gainful employment, culture, history, community spirit and despite its location - a lot of opportunity. So why should location mean lack of services? Why should my choice to live in a town that contributes to our region and our country in mining, agriculture and infrastructure make me have any less rights to what I would call BASIC health care than someone in a large town or city? Why should my location mean I must wait to learn the fate of my pregnancy or possibly face losing my child to a common virus in transit to services?

The people we have working in Cobar are capable and caring medical professionals. They face severe scrutiny just trying to do their jobs when they aren't provided the tools to do it. The media would have you believe that these people are heartless and turn people away simply because they don't want to help. I can tell you I have never encountered anyone like that working in Cobar medical services in my life.

The Australian Health Care Charter states that all Australians have the right to access and safety.

Access is defined as having healthcare and services that meet my needs. Safety is defined as receiving safe and high quality health care that meets a national standard. How can this be apart of our NATIONAL charter when it clearly doesn't apply to rural NSW? I know for one, that I do not feel safe knowing my family, my friends and my town are more likely to die unnecessarily just because of where we choose to live. That a life feels of lesser value because of where you call home.

Please take time to consider that stories like mine are not entirely unique and occurring across our state as we speak. Please consider it and afford us the rights given to cities. Use our stories to show the government and even other citizens of NSW the injustices we in rural areas face daily. I have only shared a snippet of my story but still hope it opens at least one persons eyes to what is really happening in the bush.

Thank you to Mr Roy Butler for sharing the opportunity to submit to this cause via social media. I hope he gains the support he and other advocates are fighting for.

Thank you for your time and consideration.