

Submission
No 224

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

Name: Name suppressed
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Partially
Confidential

Dear Committee Members

Submission: Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales.

As a resident based in Katoomba, Blue Mountains, I would like to share my experiences of accessing quality health and hospital services within the area that I live.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that Katoomba and the upper Blue Mountains should be classified as a regional area and not part of Metropolitan Sydney.

Geographically, Katoomba and the upper mountains is in a difficult position. Due to one entry and exit via the Great Western Highway, the townships can be cut off from travelling down the mountain to Nepean Hospital in the event of snow, bushfires or accidents on the highway.

Katoomba has been identified as the strategic centre of the Blue Mountains and Council is currently undergoing a process to establish a master plan for the future. It is critical that health and hospital services are improved as the situation is currently critical and not adequately servicing the community or sustaining tourism demand.

I would like to highlight my own personal experience with accessing health services whilst undergoing treatment for Breast Cancer in 2016/17.

Firstly, the nearest diagnostic and treatment centres for cancer are located an hour away in Penrith.

The closest place to Katoomba at which to get a mammogram is located in Penrith. Breast Cancer prevention should be a priority and I am surprised that there are no mammograms offered at Katoomba Hospital or any other private based health provider within the Blue Mountains.

I was only 42 when diagnosed and had an 18 month old child. Apart from my husband, there was no family support. So in terms of treatment, my chemotherapy had to take place again at Penrith over a course of 3 months. This put additional strain on the whole family unit.

At the end of the chemotherapy, at my weakest physical and emotional point, I had to drive myself to Penrith 5 consecutive days a week over a period of 6 weeks, for radiotherapy as my husband either had to work or look after our child. This was a 2 hour round trip - that was without traffic. With traffic or accidents on the motorway, it could be up to 3 hours travel. There are no radiotherapy machines at Katoomba Hospital. I don't understand why when cancer rates within the population are increasing and demand for treatment is high.

I met many other cancer patients whilst in the waiting room at the Cancer Care Centre at Nepean Hospital. Some had come as far as Lithgow which means they would have had a 3 hour round trip or longer on a daily basis to undergo radiotherapy.

Whilst there are community health transport services to Nepean Hospital from the Blue Mountains, they are far and few between. These mini buses make many stops on the way so what might be a 2 hour round trip when driving yourself, turns into a 4-6 hour journey with one of these community buses. They don't always align with your treatment/appointment times and you take the risk of missing your allocated time.

Nepean Hospital is not located near the direct train line between Katoomba/Penrith. Kingsford Train Station is the closest station but, as a cancer patient, you do not have the energy to do the walk from the station to the hospital. Even if it was a direct line, again, it would be a 2 hour round train trip. Not to mention the fact that with a compromised immune system due to chemotherapy, you want to avoid public transport in order to minimise the risk of infection.

There is no doubt that the daily commute of 2 hours to receive cancer treatment over a 6 week period delayed my recovery. I am sure that in some instances, the added stress on the body would be severely detrimental to the prospects of actual recovery from cancer.

It is crucial that the Katoomba Hospital receive much needed upgrades to support those patients going through cancer as well as other major disease treatment. Diagnostic tools that are provided in Nepean Hospital should be provided to Katoomba Hospital.

The facilities in Katoomba Hospital are in dire need of funding for repairs and upgrades to service the Blue Mountains Community.

It is also important to note that, as a major international tourist destination with many outdoor pursuits such as rock climbing that present a risk of injury, health and hospital services in the area need to be well equipped to deal with trauma and unexpected accidents whilst servicing large fluctuations in visitor numbers, especially during holiday periods.

Additionally, with bushfire a major risk to the area, the hospital should be well staffed and equipped to deal with trauma that could be a result of burns and smoke inhalation etc. to the local population.

In terms of local health services, it can take up to 2 weeks to get an appointment with a doctor. There also seems to be a lack of bulk billing options for patients. However, if you live in a city centre such as Sydney, it is easy to find a doctor who will bulk bill you. I was told that this is due to population numbers which again highlights the fact that the upper mountain is regional and not part of Sydney.

Due to demand, there are many people who can't get an appointment with a doctor so instead, will go to the Emergency Department in Katoomba Hospital to seek treatment - especially on a weekend when the Medical Centres are closed. As a result, the Emergency Department is overwhelmed.

On one visit the Emergency Department at Katoomba Hospital there were not adequate facilities to assist me so I was transported by ambulance to Nepean Hospital where I waited, by myself, in their Emergency Department for 5 hours before being seen. It is obvious that

the Nepean Hospital Emergency Department is also overwhelmed in having to service such a large area. Increasing resources and facilities at Katoomba Hospital would no doubt ease the demand on Nepean Hospital.

Increasing medical services and upgrading Katoomba Hospital will result in more employment for an area that is suffering economically. There are many people who can no longer afford to live in metropolitan Sydney and are making a tree-change to the Blue Mountains. However, there are a lack of jobs, infrastructure and services. There is also a socio-economic component to the area, high drug use, a demand for social housing, mental health challenges and an ageing population to be considered in terms of health outcomes.

Thank you for considering my submission and for providing the opportunity to share my story as well as my frustrations in accessing quality medical outcomes in the community in which I live.