

Submission  
No 270

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

**Organisation:** Gunnedah Early Childhood Network  
**Date Received:** 12 December 2020

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Partially  
Confidential



The Hon. Greg Donnelly, MLC  
Chair  
Portfolio Committee No. 2 - Health

Friday 11<sup>th</sup> December 2020

**Submission to NSW Inquiry - Health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales**

Dear Greg and Committee Members,

I am writing on behalf of the Gunnedah Early Childhood Network, a collective of local community agencies with a vision where every child is cared for, to raise concerns about the provision of health services in the area.

The mission of our Network is to promote the professionalism and value of early childhood education in the Gunnedah region while facilitating greater access to resources and services that families with young children need. Network members consistently encounter families who have difficulty accessing health and allied health services for their children in the local area, some of whom also have added barriers to access such as lack of transport, mental health concerns, poor understanding of health services available and financial limitations to access health services in other locations.

People living in the Gunnedah Shire Council area are experiencing significant difficulty in obtaining basic health care due to very poor availability of General Practitioners. Evidence of this can be seen across all media types and in discussion with just about anybody living in the area. A survey conducted through our GECHO network in November 2020 identified that 4 in 5 families were unable to access a GP when required for their child in Gunnedah.

Unfortunately, the availability of local paediatric services in our area is extremely poor, both from government and private practitioners. Currently, the closest paediatricians to Gunnedah are 80km away in Tamworth (NSW Health), Narrabri - 99km (consultant paediatrician through Healthwise) or Moree – 200km (private practitioner outreaching from Armidale).

Over 70% of people who completed the GECHO survey stated their child had required a paediatrician with a third of those reporting they had to wait over 12 months for an appointment in Tamworth, the nearest provision of paediatric services to the Gunnedah area.



Half of the GECHO survey respondents that required paediatric services stated they travelled to other areas to access a paediatrician rather than waiting for an appointment in Tamworth. These respondents travelled to Armidale, Newcastle, Sydney and Brisbane for timely access to a paediatrician, distances that take from 2 hours to over 7 hours when travelling by car. Many respondents also reported travelling similar distances for Ear, Nose and Throat specialists, psychologists and allied health professionals.

In recent correspondence from NSW Minister for Health and Medical Research, Brad Hazzard, there is provision for 4 Full Time Equivalents at the Tamworth Paediatric Clinic provided through Hunter New England Local Health District. The allocation of 4FTE paediatricians is expected to service the outpatient Tamworth Paediatric Clinic in addition to responding to presentations at the Emergency Department and regular rounds of paediatric patients admitted at the hospital. The Tamworth Hospital provides services to the residents of the New England and Upper Hunter region.

Recent contact with staff at the Tamworth clinic identified that a wait of at least 2 years is not unexpected for children who are not triaged as a 'Medical Priority' and that there are currently over 700 children on the waiting list. It is also understood that a replacement for who departed the clinic in early 2019 has still not been secured and in November 2020, another paediatrician, , left the clinic leaving it appallingly understaffed. With over 55,000 people aged between 0-18 in the region, provision of 4FTE paediatricians at Tamworth Hospital is inadequate to effectively support medical and developmental outcomes.

Tamworth Paediatric Clinic provided an outreach service to Gunnedah many years ago. After correspondence was received from Brad Hazzard by the Gunnedah Early Childhood Network in August this year, Tamworth Community Health completed a review of their paediatric clinic patient profile and current availability of doctors. It was concluded there was no possibility of reinstating an outreach service to Gunnedah in the foreseeable future due to a lack of resources available.

The review of health services for children, young people and families within the NSW Health system by Emeritus Professor Richard Henry AM in 2019 identified many recommendations to improve developmental outcomes for young children. The review identified structural and resourcing issues across the health service with one whole section of the review and six recommendations specifically addressing the importance of the first 2000 days in supporting positive long-term benefits to the community and health system. However, reliable recruitment and retention of paediatric clinicians in rural and remote communities was surprisingly overlooked in the recommendations from Prof. Henry's review.

The early childhood sector encompasses the age range of birth to 8 years. There is a tremendous body of evidence stating that early intervention for children displaying signs of developmental concerns is imperative to long term benefits, not only to the individual child but also their families and the wider community. With ongoing issues surrounding access to paediatric and allied health services, the capacity to improve outcomes for young children appears almost impossible. The Gunnedah community has seen a significant increase in vulnerability, supported by the AEDC, in the social and language domains over the last three census periods. Without adequate supports for assessment and diagnosis at a minimum, attempts to address developmental concerns will continue to struggle.



The event of COVID-19 has seen necessary adoption of telehealth, yet this is not a suitable service delivery method to enable effective assessment and diagnosis of young children with developmental concerns. With children being triaged according to 'Medical Priority', young children displaying behavioural concerns are often left on the Tamworth waiting list for years. Travel support in NSW through the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS) and integrated health and education assessments through Royal Far West do not alleviate the current needs of our local children. The IPTAAS scheme often relies upon practitioners and networks informing potential recipients of its existence and capacity of individuals to be able to navigate processes to receive financial support. Royal Far West, while an exemplary service, is oversubscribed and due to geographical distances is frequently out of reach for many families.

The impact of not receiving assessment and treatment during early childhood is that development is unnecessarily delayed which can lead to poor educational outcomes in the longer term. Poor educational outcomes are also linked to an inability to maintain effective relationships and consistent employment and higher rates of criminal offences in adulthood. A paper by Teager, Fox and Stafford titled '*How Australia can invest early and return more: A new look at the \$15b cost and opportunity*' released in October 2019 suggests that late intervention for children and youth costs the country over 15 billion dollars annually. Teager et al. outline clear evidence supporting an early intervention approach that stretches across government portfolios to enable long term benefits to individuals, families, and the wider community.

The distance Gunnedah families must travel to access paediatric services is a geographical barrier that is unsurmountable for those without the resources to overcome it. In conjunction with access to limited local General Practitioners for a referral, the extensive waiting list at the closest paediatric clinic, and social and financial barriers for families with low socio-economic backgrounds, our local communities require a greater allocation of resources to effectively address health and developmental concerns for our children.

We look forward to hearing from you regarding the concerns raised in this letter. Our Network would welcome dialogue referring action that we could support as a collaborative to address the needs of the Gunnedah community and all families located in rural, regional and remote areas of NSW.

Yours sincerely,

Rebecca Dridan

Chair

Gunnedah Early Childhood Network

