

**Submission
No 386**

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

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To Whom It May Concern

I live in Parkes, Central-West NSW and I am deeply concerned about the level of medical care that I and members of our community receive. I moved from Sydney to the country 30 years ago. I was used to having access to GPs and specialists. The situation now is far worse than when I first arrived with my husband and toddlers, even though it was not acceptable then.

When I first arrived, gaining an appointment to a GP of choice was difficult, although not as difficult as it is now. There was still a long wait requiring weeks before you were able to access your family, local GP. This caused significant difficulties. My son was born here and was very ill at the age of 9-10 months. He had a serious, respiratory infection. As getting in to see our regular GP without waiting weeks, was impossible, we were passed from one to another different GP each with different, usually lower levels of experience. They all prescribed different medications but his health was declining. I remember one night standing before the Emergency Ward at Parkes Hospital which then had a sign indicating that I should think carefully before ringing the bell so that a matron would come and let me in. I walked away with a very sick baby.

Finally, the clerical assistant at the local GP practice took pity and gave me an appointment with one of the senior doctors. He showed concern, diagnosed my son's asthma and arranged an appointment on the spot with the area paediatrician. We travelled that night to Forbes to have an appointment at 8pm who finally prescribed different medications that set my son on a path to improvement after a stay in hospital.

Since then, medical services with regard to GPs have declined. At first, if you waited 6 or more weeks, you could see your own doctor. This was of no help if you had an urgent need or even required a medical certificate for work. If you were fortunate, perhaps you would recover after a while.

When my mother-in-law was gravely ill, she refused to see anyone but her regular doctor. When she was in deep pain, I convinced her to go to the old Parkes Hospital. The Matron came to the door and asked me to come back later. I stood my ground and refused to do. She came back with a wheelchair. My mother-in-law was dead within 6 weeks.

A couple of years ago, my favoured GP retired and I no longer had access to a GP that I could feel comfortable enough with to discuss all medical issues. This caused me a lot of grief. The practice had been sold to Ochre Health and, if you now ring for an appointment, you will see one of several GPs each time. You could still be asked to wait for some days before seeing anyone for something that is quite urgent. This means that my family and members of our community will see a different doctor each time that they visit. There is no longer any ongoing relationship with one GP. One doesn't feel comfortable about visiting there anymore. One of my elderly friends who is in her 80's had breathing difficulties and saw four different GPs trying to deal with the problem in a very short space of time. That was not satisfactory!

The situation is now that, if you need to see a GP urgently, you will see a physician that will be here in the town for 6 months only before moving elsewhere. A doctor told me this week that these doctors, often from overseas, leave their families in Sydney, do the required six months of practice and then head back to Sydney. The wait can still be more than a week at times.

For some years now, I have been dealing with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. I have had to very regularly travel approximately 100 kilometres to the local bigger town of Orange to see a psychologist. We drive because there is no direct train link on most days between Parkes and Orange. One cannot get on a train in the morning and return in the afternoon. My husband and I drive extremely regularly (sometimes to two appointments in the one week) to Orange to access specialist services. Both of us have been diagnosed with macular degeneration and we are concerned about what will happen if one of us can no longer drive.

Having to deal with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder meant that I needed regular prescriptions to keep problems under control. I was passed to a different doctor each time who required me to explain why I was on the medication. These doctors were short stay, and usually male, and I did not enjoy having to explain the reasons behind my diagnosis to a complete stranger over and over again. I could not get ongoing treatment in Parkes and, on the advice of my psychologist, I now travel to Orange once a month to see a wonderful GP who has been caring for medical issues and mental health problems.

My husband has a deep reluctance to see a doctor as it will be a different one each time. Last year, although being a very active person, he had to have a quadruple by-pass operation. He needs to have a regular, local doctor. We cannot complain about the services that had at Parkes and Orange Hospitals. He was flown to Sydney and taken to a private hospital.

The maternity ward was closed for some time with great risk to women. I now note that it is a low risk birthing unit where women are looked after by midwives. Higher risk pregnancies have to take place in Orange. One of my friends left it too late to travel to Orange a few years ago and her baby arrived stillborn. It can lead to women travelling in labour the long distance to Orange with all the risks of women giving birth by the side of the road in areas that are out of range for telephone services.

The statistics indicate clearly that rural people are dying much earlier in Australia than those in the cities. When you see what is happening first-hand, it is no wonder. Many people are reluctant to see a doctor. Wait times are far too long. We live in a large town but how difficult must it be for people in smaller towns.

I do not think that this situation is acceptable in Australia. Our town has a population of 10,000-11,000. I think we deserve better. When I first started visiting my daughter who works in Sydney, I discovered on one short block from her home that there were the practices of over 12 GPs. Universities are training so many doctors but they don't want to live anywhere but Sydney. Things have only got worse over the years. Talking about it is insufficient: real change must occur.