

**Submission
No 469**

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

Organisation: Leura Gardens Festival Inc.

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The Committee of Leura Gardens Festival Inc. appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to your Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales.

By way of background, since 1965 the Committee has held an annual Gardens Festival in Leura to raise funds for the Blue Mountains District ANZAC Memorial Hospital (usually known as the Katoomba Hospital). Unfortunately, the 2020 Festival had to be cancelled because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but we are hopeful we can hold the Festival again this year. Over the years, the Festival has raised over \$3 million for the purchase of equipment and improvements to the Hospital's facilities.

For example, in recent years, we have funded:

- the establishment of a five-room outpatient clinic.
- the purchase of an ultrasound machine, a lung function box and a colonoscope for gynaecology.
- installation of a pneumatic tube system between the Emergency Department and Pathology to enable much quicker delivery of blood samples for analysis.
- a much-needed upgrade of the allied health centre, including the purchase of new equipment.

Funding provided in the 2019/20 financial year for the last two of these projects alone was more than \$355,000. It could very properly be argued that all these projects should have been funded by Government, but it is an unfortunate reality that if the Festival Committee had not done so, it is unlikely they would have eventuated for years, if at all.

In addition to our Committee who collectively contribute many thousands of hours each year to organising the Festival, we have very generous property owners who are willing to prepare and open their gardens for several thousand visitors each year, along with several hundred volunteers who assist with a variety of tasks leading up to and during the Festival. Everyone involved in this major event, which it is estimated also contributes around \$2 million to the local economy from accommodation, restaurants, shopping etc., does so because of their commitment to the Katoomba Hospital, as a vital community resource.

The central thrust of our submission is that the current Katoomba Hospital is no longer fit for purpose and needs to be replaced by a modern facility which can meet more of the health needs of a population which includes many older people, as well as a growing number of younger families. Built in the aftermath of the First World War as a memorial to those who served in that conflict (we understand it is the only surviving War Memorial

Hospital from that period in NSW, if not Australia), the original parts of the hospital are now nearly a century old. Successive additions and alterations over the years have resulted in what can best be described as a 'warren' of buildings of various ages with endless interconnecting corridors and stairs. The buildings leak in heavy rain, and the haphazard layout must make it extremely challenging for medical, nursing and support staff to care for patients adequately and efficiently.

Unlike many other similar locations in the State with similar populations, the Blue Mountains has not been included in the health infrastructure upgrades that have been made in recent years. A possible explanation for this oversight could be our proximity to major hospitals at Nepean and Westmead, but we do not accept that this is an acceptable justification. While some services can only be provided at a reasonable cost in the context of a major hospital in a larger population centre, residents of the Blue Mountains should have convenient access to the services which those in similarly sized centres take for granted. When compared with other equivalent hospitals it might be claimed that the relative proximity to Nepean justifies not providing more services at Katoomba, but it needs to be remembered that there is only one major road linking the Blue Mountains and Nepean, and a major accident, bushfire or extreme weather can close the Great Western Highway for several hours.

While our Committee has been told for some time by successive General Managers during their periodic briefings that discussions are taking place about a new hospital, and various 'promises' have been made by candidates at recent elections, no specific proposals have been forthcoming.

A properly resourced new hospital would enable the provision of a greater range of services to residents of the upper Blue Mountains and avoid the need for many residents to travel to Nepean or beyond for their health needs. The recent establishment of a renal dialysis unit was a very welcome, if long overdue, addition to the services available at Katoomba. This removed the need for dialysis patients to travel to Nepean several times a week, but it is only one example of the services which should be available locally.

Another obvious example is chemotherapy and related cancer treatment. Again, our General Manager has reported on several occasions that there have been discussions about the potential for delivery of chemotherapy to be available locally, but to date nothing has eventuated. While it would probably be necessary for initial diagnosis and assessment to still be carried out at a major hospital, the availability of ongoing treatment locally would avoid the need for patients to make frequent trips to Nepean or even further afield.

The opening of the outpatient clinic funded by the Festival Committee has facilitated the provision of some 'specialist' services locally with a range of medical specialists now making regular or periodic visits to Katoomba to see patients, rather than those patients having to travel for consultations. There is obviously scope for this to be extended, especially if ongoing treatment can also be provided in a modern hospital setting.

We therefore urge your committee to recommend that priority be given to the building of a new hospital, either as a redevelopment of the existing site, or at another suitable location, as a precursor to expanding the range of health services available to our community.