

**Submission
No 621**

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

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My submission is based on personal experience of the health service and my chief focus is to provide testimony as to the vital contribution that local health services, including local hospitals, make to the health and wellbeing of rural communities. Disturbing rumours circulate periodically that small, local hospitals will be closed in a move to streamline and centralise services. Such a move would be short-sighted as it would have a negative impact on the health of people in regional areas who, according to the research, are already disadvantaged in terms of health outcomes in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts.

My husband and I are in our sixties and work full-time but my husband has several medical conditions for which he takes medication and visits specialists in metropolitan areas as needed. However, his venous incompetence that causes chronic leg ulcers is an on-going condition that is treated bi-weekly by the nursing staff at the local hospital. They monitor his wounds, change the treatment and offer a superb level of care that is both professional and personal. As he is prey to cellulitis, the hospital can quickly admit him and administer intravenous antibiotics as needed. He has had surgery and a variety of interventions but nothing has provided a permanent solution. Without access to our local hospital and the wonderful nursing staff, we could not continue to live here. We would have to give up work and move to our nearest city, Dubbo, so he could access the on-going treatment that is presently available locally. Although I am healthy, I think at my age it would be difficult to get another job. The point I am trying to make, is that not only does the local hospital provide essential medical care, it also makes it possible for people to continue to work and contribute to the economy. With the de-population of regional towns, the lack of a hospital and medical services would arguably sound the death knell for many of them. In addition, the time taken to drive 120km to the nearest hospital in emergency situations would also be the death knell for many patients. Without our local hospital it is highly probably my husband would no longer be alive.

As for regional hospitals, experiences have varied over the years in my interaction with government hospitals in both Dubbo and Sydney. One thing that stands out is the poor level of communication. Despite reams of paperwork, hours of questioning, you will still find the next shift or the professional you are dealing with has little idea what is going on. I think there should be staff who co-ordinate all the information between all the specialists, different doctors and other health professionals who have an overall perspective, who see the bigger picture. This would not only facilitate making the best decisions for the patient but would also save time with the patient having to start from scratch with every doctor and health worker. It would save time spent sorting out mix-ups and provide a holistic approach that would reduce stress and increase efficiency.

Another issue I had with public hospitals in Dubbo and Sydney was a lack of clarity over procedures which I think stems from insufficient oversight over specialist/ consultants. This is in the context of having private health insurance and agreeing to use it in a public hospital. While I have always agreed to do that, I have had the experience of discovering that there was a charge for a procedure not carried out. When I called my then health insurance, I was told it was approved by Medicare. When I rang Medicare, I was told to ring my provider. That

seemed pointless as that was the surgeon who had charged for the phantom procedure and in any case I would only get through to a secretary. Since I was not personally out of pocket, the people I spoke to were puzzled about my complaint but I think it is important that we ensure tax payers money is used properly if we want to continue to enjoy a world class health system. I'm sure this is not a common occurrence but I was disturbed that it could happen and that there appeared to be no mechanism to address it.

We in Australia have a health system that is one of the best in the world, if not the best. We need to maintain what we have and improve where necessary. We need to ensure that the health of regional Australia does not fall farther behind the metropolitan population by keeping our local hospitals and health services.

Thank You

Bernadette Robson