West Belconnen Health Cooperative Ltd

Better Health Together

PO Box 6865, Charnwood ACT, 2615

Submission to:
ACT Standing Committee on Health and Disability

Closure of Wanniassa Medical Centre

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RESPONSE TO TERMS OF REFERENCE

1&2. The circumstance of the closure and likely impacts – based upon Belconnen experience

The closure of the Wanniassa medical clinic is the latest in a recent and disturbing trend across the ACT. Since the arrival in the ACT of the 'corporate' medical centres - a significant number of practices/GPs in outlying areas have been closed down or partially closed or subsumed into corporate practices in the town centres.

Impacts of corporates

- The overall number of GPs servicing ACT has not improved (estimated shortfall 75 across ACT and 22 for Belconnen[1])
- distribution of GPs has contracted with less in outlying and disadvantaged areas[2]
- many residents from outlying and disadvantaged areas (eg W Belconnen (Charnwood area) are not accessing GPs when they need to[3] – pers comms
- significant numbers go to hospital emergency, Ambulance or local pharmacy with high treatment costs often resulting in long hospital stays[4] – ACT Hospital Stats, pers comms
- Bulk-billing rates for Fraser electorate have improved but, along with Canberra, are still the lowest in the country – Medicare Stats
- creamed off most profitable part of the business and other practices are now loaded up with the more complex, chronic cases and low-profit consultations.
- livelihood of local pharmacies, businesses and shopping centres threatened as corporates often have 'in-house' pharmacies and the local flow-through trade is diminished.

In Belconnen the above has happened both before and since Primary Health Care established the Ginninderra Medical Centre at Belconnen Town Centre – see below:

Belconnen experience – prior to PHC

- 1990s-early 2000s – many medical practices in outlying areas closed including one at Flynn, two at Charnwood and one at Macgregor – leaving a severe shortage of GPs in West Belconnen
- 2000 onwards - historically and nationally low bulk-billing rates in the Fraser electorate even worse in outer Belconnen because so few GPs there – Medicare stats
- 2000-2004 - lots of residents particularly from outer Belconnen using Calvary emergency instead of GPs (Charnwood 55% above ACT average) – ACT Hospital Statistics
- Mayne Health/Symbion took over the practice at Kippax Fair.

Belconnen experience – post PHC

Primary Health Care (PHC) established the Ginninderra Medical Centre in the light industrial part of Belconnen town centre and:

- closed Hall practice and brought GPs and staff came across to PHC Belconnen – Canb. Times
- bought GPs out of Higgins and other local practices – Canb. Times
- the number of GPs in outlying and disadvantaged areas decreased further[5]
- patients complained of difficulty in getting buses or transport to PHC – pers comms
- the promised PHC patient bus services was too inconvenient and then unavailable – pers comms
- patients complained of long waiting times 2, 3 and up to 6 hours to see PHC GPs – pers comms
- patients complained of 5 minute consultations and non-holistic approach – pers comms
- patients complained about not being able to make appointments or see GP of choice for continuity of care – pers comms
- PHC took over Mayne/Symbion practice at Kippax and moved 4 GPs to PHC Belconnen – pers comms
- GPs have complained of work dissatisfaction and anti-competitive practices restricting their future practice in a 10 kilometre radius of PHC – pers comms

3. The Nature of ACT Government's relationship with privately owned general practice

The ACT Government has a legitimate role to play in regulating the presence of corporates in the ACT to protect the quality, availability, accessibility and equity of access to primary care for ACT citizens and to protect existing GPs, pharmacies, health centres and associated businesses from monopolistic, predatory or anti-competitive practices.

The ACT also has a role to play in acting in favour of disadvantaged and under-serviced communities.

4. Possible options for future delivery of GP services in the ACT

An exciting model for delivering GP services within a cooperative community-based health and wellbeing centre has been developed and feasibility tested by the West Belconnen Health Cooperative[6].

The model is similar to the Westgate Health Cooperative[7] model developed successfully over the past 20 years in Melbourne's western suburbs As a partnership between community, business and government, the model has the capacity to harnesses the resources of all sectors to meet growing health needs within the community at low recurrent cost to government.

Key features of the model are:

- it is a 'one-stop' shop for services such as health promotion, early intervention, nurse practitioner, GP services, family support, mental health, child and maternal health, Indigenous support, recovery, pathology and physiotherapy
- partnerships are established after 4 years of community development
- self-sustaining cooperative means low recurrent funding burden for government

- it is particularly relevant to disadvantaged and under-serviced communities
- services are where they are needed – in the community
- its quality family care and holistic and preventative approach
- community involvement, engagement and volunteering through the Cooperative
- bulk-billed medical services
- appointments and adequate consultation times
- work conditions, salary and social model attracts GPs and staff to ACT's GP workforce
- complementary with other local business including nearest GPs
- coordinated management administered by Cooperative eases GP workload
- strong community Board and governance structure

Two thirds of the funding for the West Belconnen centre has been committed and discussions are continuing with business and government regarding the balance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: The Standing Committee move to safeguard the quality, distribution, equality of access to GPs, medical and allied health services and protect local business against anti-competitive or predatory practice, by developing rules/legislation for the regulation of corporates.

Recommendation 2. The Standing Committee move to support and adopt the cooperative model (as developed over 4 years in West Belconnen – Charnwood) as a solution for Charnwood area and if feasible the Wanniassa/South Tuggeranong area, in both cases possibly with support and co-location of budgeted 'walk-in' centres and intervention as needed with PHC over the Wanniassa site.

REFERENCES

[1,2,5,6] Feasibility Study and Business Plan – West Belconnen Community Health and Wellbeing Centre, April 2008, West Belconnen Health Cooperative)

[3,4] Capital Chemist Charnwood, reports from Pharmacist/Proprietor, Brian Frith

[7] Westgate Health Coop Website: http://www.westgatehealth.coop/