

Dianne Proctor OAM

16 August, 2008

Ms Karin MacDonald MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Health and Disability
ACT Legislative Assembly
Civic
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms MacDonald and Committee Members

Submission on the Closure of the Wanniasa Medical Centre.

I am making this submission as a patient of a GP at the now closed Wanniasa Medical Centre.

I have a chronic disease (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease or COPD). This now necessitates me using oxygen 24/7 and I am very limited in distances I walk (about 50 to 100 metres) which means I rely on a small electric scooter when I leave my home.

My former GP of some 12 years retired in 2007 and with the help and advice of colleagues, I finally transferred to Dr Jill Brown of Wanniasa. We steadily built up a respectful partnership in dealing with my health issues. I am a great believer that I, as a patient, must work in partnership with my GP, in order to maintain the maximum level of health and also in order to prevent hospitalisation as much as possible. A level of mutual trust is essential and also, of course, cost effective, from Governments' point of view..

I am reasonably knowledgeable regarding health care as I worked as CEO of two major NGOs, dealing with family planning at a National and International Level, so I am used to dealing with health professionals. I think that this probably gives me skills that some other patients may not have in standing up for my rights and my general understanding of how the health system works in Australia. I give this background so that the Committee understands that I am not naive regarding medical politics in this country. I would also like to support the general thrust of the submission made by the Health Care Consumers Association ACT Inc.

However, I want my submission to be read as a plea from a patient for a sensible outcome to an outrageous decision made by the Company which currently owns both the Wanniasa and Phillip Medical Centres. I was verbally informed of the pending closure of the Wanniasa facility only two weeks before the move was made and this was by chance as I rang the clinic on a routine matter. Since then I have received a long letter from the General Manager Medical Centres, Dr. Henry Bateman, replying to my own letter to him about the closing of the centre. He sends as an attachment to his letter a letter signed by him, with the letterhead Symbion Health, dated 8 August, addressed to me. I never received that particular letter, other than an attachment to his longer reply.

I would hope that other patients were luckier than I was and did receive such a notice before finding out that the clinic moved.

Moving on to more general issues, I would be happy if the Standing Committee could investigate the following areas of concern I have:-

- Why was such short notice given to patients at the Wanniassa Clinic?
- If the Wanniassa Medical Centre was not financially viable, why has the centre recently been upgraded at some considerable cost? I would assume that a company such as Primary Health Care Inc would have extensive budget and accounting staff who would have been aware of the upcoming non - viability of the centre many months prior to such an event necessitating precipitate closure.
- In the decision to locate to Phillip, what did Primary Health Care Ltd plan to do about the parking situation in Phillip? I first visited the centre at Phillip on Wednesday, 13 August and it took my husband about 20 minutes to find a parking space, which was accessible for me and my scooter. At no time during this period did parking become available on the Health Centre site itself.
- I note that Dr Bateman of Primary Health Care has said that the company will provide a courtesy car from Wanniassa to Phillip on Mondays, Wednesdays and Friday between the hours of 9.00 am and 3.00 am. I just hope that elderly and disabled persons can arrange to be sick on the days the courtesy car is available! Also, I note that there is no guarantee of this being an ongoing service and I am frankly suspicious that the service will continue indefinitely. I would like a written confirmation from either your committee or Dr Bateman that this is a long term, non negotiable commitment
- I also wonder at the location of the Phillip Health Centre generally. It is very difficult to access by public transport and for those without cars; there is a fair distance to walk from the nearest bus service. This not only affects the elderly and disabled but also disadvantages parents of young children without private transport. I am aware that the Community Services in Canberra are struggling to meet the demand for volunteer driving at the moment. Surely, it is untenable for a profit making company to expect volunteers to take up the slack caused by the Company's drive for profits!
- I also ask the Standing Committee to seek assurances from Dr Bateman that the ability of the Wanniassa patients to access their own GPs, through a separate reception and booking system will be on an ongoing basis and not just in the short term. Again, I am suspicious that this is just a sweetener to keep the existing patients reasonably happy. Is there a way that the Standing Committee can receive a commitment that this will be ongoing for the foreseeable future?
- **I am totally outraged to hear that Primary Health Care has an ongoing lease on the Wanniassa property (I believe until 2012). I understand that the Company is prepared to pay the rent until the time the lease expires. This means that there is no chance in the short term for another group of GPs to work out of the clinic under whatever system they might**

adopt. This is an arrogant waste of money to stifle competition. Whether one is politically from the left, right or centre, this goes totally against the grain of an open and accountable system. It is also a remarkable decision if the Wanniasa Clinic was not financially viable.

In closing, I would like to make a few general philosophical points. Australia makes much of patients having choices. The closure of the Wanniasa Medical Centre shows how those choices may be overridden by the current trend to privatise everything. Dr Bateman makes much about all services being on site at Phillip. That may be so. However, again as a person with a chronic complaint, I understand the importance of using *one* pharmacist for all my needs. I choose to use the one at Erindale but there is an extremely good one at Wanniasa too. I would also point out that at Erindale; there are X-ray facilities and also Pathology facilities. The trip from Wanniasa to Erindale is a couple of minutes by private transport and there is also a reasonable bus service between the two centres.

There are a few other matters which I cannot raise because I have no legal protection and cannot afford to employ lawyers. However, the Committee might like to investigate whether all Doctors from Wanniasa transferred to Phillip and if not, why not? Also there is the general question of over servicing by these large private medical centres. I am not in anyway accusing the Phillip Health Centre or Primary Health Care Limited of such practices but I do suggest that the Standing Committee might wish to investigate these issues further.

I am willing to appear in person before the Committee if it would be useful. As mentioned previously, I attach Dr Bateman's reply to my letter of complaint.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely

Dianne Proctor

Attachment: Letter from Dr. H Bateman to Dianne Proctor