

Appropriation Bill and Estimates response - July 3rd, 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (17:35): I rise to make a response to the estimates committees process. I take note of what has happened with country health. As was mentioned previously, certainly by the member for Schubert, the Country Health Care Plan put out under the cover of darkness on budget day will be the death knell for 43 hospitals in country South Australia. Most of the hospitals either in my electorate or adjoining and servicing my electorate are being cut back to GP Plus hospitals. One hospital will remain at Murray Bridge, which will become a country community hospital—but there is already a problem there. We are talking about keeping people out of the city with the so-called Country Health Care Plan.

Information supplied to me shows that both Murray Bridge and Port Pirie hospitals were sending on people last Friday because they were full. Where will the people go when they get channelled out from Tailem Bend, Meningie, Mannum, Karoonda, Lameroo or Pinnaroo? In the past couple of days the health department has amended its so-called Country Health Care Plan. I would love to know how much it has spent on advertising because the material uses words such as may or maybe: 'We might retain services,' and we might do this 'depending on staffing'. It is a kick in the guts for rural South Australia when it has been hurting since 2002 as a result of years of extended drought.

We will now have a country general hospital at Port Lincoln, and I think that is absolutely necessary for the West Coast, and surprise, surprise, one at Whyalla for the member for Giles. Then let us look at how far we have to travel to reach another country general hospital—all the way to Berri, which is almost on the edge of the state. There is not much more than Renmark on the other side. When you get to Mount Gambier, it is worse. I have asked in this place before what the planning is behind making Mount Gambier the country general hospital. All it is doing is appeasing the current member for Mount Gambier for his allegiance to the Labor Party—he was a former Liberal Party member—and I hope he is proud of what he has done.

It just does not add up when people from even as far south as Millicent will have to travel north for their health care. They will have nowhere to go because Murray Bridge and Mount Barker will be overflowing. It will turn into a huge mess. I note Murray Bridge is being retained as a country community hospital, and that is a good thing. As I mentioned, it is already at overflow level. Now we have a confusing mismatch of four groups of hospitals under these so-called GP Plus emergency hospitals. I take that to mean bandaid centres. I believe this has come about because of pressure applied from different groups.

There was a protest meeting at Yorketown on the Yorke Peninsula which 700 people attended. There is one at Balaklava tonight, which I am sure will be well attended; and last night at Bordertown, 1,500 people attended a public meeting about their health service on a cold winter's night. Who in their right mind would downgrade a health service on the Dukes Highway, which is the main link to Melbourne and the second busiest road in this country?

I reiterate that I live very close to the Dukes Highway, and only the other day there was another terrible accident: a poor gentleman lost his life as a result of hitting a truck. This happens far too often. Where will they have to go—

Mr Kenyon interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: Thankfully, there is a hospital at Keith. I just hope that the member for Newland never travels south-east of Adelaide. In fact, I hope he never travels outside of his home at Stirling (which obviously is nowhere near his electorate), because if he does have an accident and needs some care, he will be in some strife because his minister has let this state down.

The Hon. P.F. Conlon: That is a bit harsh.

Mr PEDERICK: No, it is not harsh, minister. I have a good working relationship with the Minister for Transport. I acknowledge at this stage that, yes, he does afford me the time for meetings. I may not always get what I want, but he will listen, so I will give him credit for that.

Mrs Geraghty interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: I get very little, I can assure the Government Whip. However, I do appreciate having access to a minister when I want to raise an issue. Let us face it, they are in power and we are not at the moment, but we are hoping to change that around very quickly in 2010. I do say that, if any member of this present government or any of their friends or family runs into strife on the Dukes Highway and they wonder why someone loses their life or does not receive adequate care in time, there is only one person to point their finger at, namely, the Minister for Health, John Hill.

We have these hospitals now which we all thought were going to be bandaid stations, but now the government does not seem to know where it is at. We will find out one day how many millions of dollars have been spent on this advertising. We have four groups. One group will become GP Plus emergency hospitals and retain current services. Why are they listed as GP Plus if there are not to be any changes? I do acknowledge that it looks as though Meningie will retain its services. That is to be applauded because it is an area that is suffering. Perhaps some commonsense has prevailed somewhere in the system.

I know the doctors down there, and I include Dr Michael Kerrigan who, along with his colleagues, has worked very hard in maintaining not just the physical health of people living in the Lake Albert area but also their mental health. They are really struggling down there. Then we have a list of hospitals to become GP Plus emergency hospitals, which, according to the government, will retain current services including birthing and/or surgical, unless there is a dramatic change in workforce sustainability or safety and quality requirements. That reads: any excuse to do something different, we will. These hospitals include: Crystal Brook, Jamestown and Bordertown. Perhaps Bordertown will have a level of service but, as the minister noted in his ministerial statement today, we need clarity.

Then we have the list of hospitals to become GP Plus emergency hospitals with birthing and/or surgical services. That may change over 10 years, but they are to retain acute admissions. When this Country Health Care Plan came out, none of these GP Plus hospitals were going to have acute admissions. That was laid out in the plan. Either there has been a backflip, or the right hand is not telling the left hand what is going on. Only the other day, the Victor Harbor *Times* reported—

The Hon. J.D. Lomax-Smith interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: Well, that's how silly it is. That's how silly the plan is. It looks as though it has been written by someone with two right hands, because they have it all A-about. George Beltchev even mentioned that there would be no changes at Strathalbyn Hospital. We were advised today that it was not a 10-minute plan. I think it was a 10-minute plan. I think it was cooked up in 10 minutes, because that is about the level of detail in the government's advertising. That is why there are so many people in country communities coming out on cold nights to attend public meetings. This is where it starts to really hurt. The hospitals in this last tranche of GP Plus emergency hospitals, in the early stages, were amongst the 43 hospitals to lose surgical services and admissions. These hospitals do not provide birthing or surgical services, and they may lose acute admissions over the next 10 years. Let us go through the few that are in Hammond—Karoonda, Lameroo, Taillem Bend and Pinnaroo. I read out those names and that means there will be no health services east of the Murray. If you are east of the Murray, from Murray Bridge to the border, somewhere over 250 kilometres, you are in real trouble. You can head to Murray Bridge, which will probably be full.

I challenge any Labor member to drive to Pinnaroo and have a look. It is a bit far out because it is outside Glen Osmond and Gepps Cross, but go on the Pinnaroo to Loxton road. Ten kilometres of that road should be replaced. The ambulances have to come back to 60 km/h, and I can vouch for that because they took me over the road doing 100 km/h, strapped in, and I am glad I was. These are the situations the Labor government does not take into account—the transport provisions. The Rural Doctors Association put in its paper the other day that it thought there will be an extra 2 million kilometres of travel. I believe there is a zero not in there: I think it will be 20 million kilometres of travel to get to services.

I note there have been news reports, and I think some people are being hoodwinked in the Mallee region into thinking that nothing will change. My reading of even this updated document is that we will lose every acute bed that we have from Taillem Bend and east. In question time today, the minister said:

In the 43 other hospitals, which are the smaller hospitals, services come and go as doctors come and go. As a result of concerns expressed in the country, we have identified 30 of those smaller hospitals where we think there is unlikely to be much change over the next 10 years because of staffing arrangements—

obviously, they have bent under pressure—

or doctors currently in place. We have identified about 13 hospitals where a very small range of services are currently provided. They are hospitals where no birthing happens now and no surgery happens now.

This is the best bit—this is the bit that really grinds. He continues:

All they do is deliver GP services and some medical acute admissions.

All they do! Then I come to the next paragraph, which states:

I will give members a flavour of what happens in those hospitals. I will refer to a number of them. In the case of Karoonda (in the electorate of Hammond) there were 185 days in 2007 when there was not one patient in that hospital—for about half the year there was not one patient in that hospital.

He goes on further:

In Pinnaroo (the member for Hammond's electorate) on 170 days there were no patients in the hospital.

This just goes to show the absolute ignorance of the Minister for Health about country health facilities in the Mallee. All these hospitals—Pinnaroo, Lameroo, Karoonda and Tailern Bend—are also shared facilities with aged care. So the nurses are there whether or not there are acute beds used. I can tell members that when the people in the bush need an acute bed, they want it. They do not want to travel hundreds of kilometres just to get an acute bed, and I have spoken of that in this place previously. My father, who is getting on a bit in life, is 88 years of age and, because he has ulcers on his legs—

Mr Venning interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: He seems pretty well for his age, the member for Schubert comments, and he is, but occasionally he has to do extended stays in Tailern Bend. I would like a personal assurance from the minister that if my father gets ill he can be admitted, but I do not think it will happen. Do you know where I think he will end up if he has another problem with an ulcer on his leg? In Adelaide. That is just where minister Hill suggested they do not want country people. But that is where this country health non-plan is going to send country people.

There are a lot of other things I could talk about in this budget. I could talk about the Mount Bold non-expansion. I asked minister Gago whether there were any environmental impact statements done for the Mount Bold expansion, or any other expansion in the Adelaide Hills. We must remember that Mount Bold was the backbone of the 2007-08 budget, and that has just disappeared into the trees. It is not even a mirage in the desert or a mirage in the Hills. It has just disappeared. There have not even been any environmental studies completed on what would happen with expansion of any reservoir in the Hills or building of any new reservoirs.

I will comment on transport just briefly. Obviously, the government put \$2 billion on the table for city transport and, as I acknowledged before, I have meetings with the Minister for Transport. I met with him regarding the Mallee transport scheme, which has changed over to a new operator. I was advised at that meeting with the minister that no services would be lost. Well, one was lost straight away before the service started. I will be keeping a close eye on what has happened with the Mallee transport and, hopefully, find out exactly how that contract was laid out. The government certainly will be held to account on this year's budget.