

RURAL DOCTORS ASSOCIATION (NSW) INC

Media release

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Doctors urge NSW Labor to match Coalition commitment on Parkes and Forbes hospitals

The Rural Doctors Association of NSW (RDANSW) is urging NSW Labor to match a commitment by the NSW Coalition to retain existing health services at Parkes and Forbes hospitals.

The NSW Coalition this week announced a \$25 million injection to the Forbes Hospital upgrade and refurbishment project and \$42.5 million for a new Parkes Hospital.

The commitment follows RDANSW concerns that an amalgamation of hospital services between Parkes and Forbes—as proposed by the Western NSW Local Health Network (LHN)—will lead to an unacceptable decrease in health services in the Lachlan Valley.

RDANSW President, Dr Tilak Dissanayake, said Western NSW LHN's proposal was entirely unsupported by doctors and other health professionals at both Parkes and Forbes, and would “almost certainly” result in a decrease in the total number of doctors servicing the area.

“The proposal put forward by Western NSW LHN is basically for one hospital to be downgraded and no longer provide acute admissions, overnight surgery and obstetrics” Dr Dissanayake said. “The other hospital would then be expected pick up the increased workload in these areas.

“But this is simply not realistic, nor acceptable, for a region that services such a massive geographical area. Parkes and Forbes together have a patient catchment of 30,000 people. Some of these people already have to travel several hours to reach one of these hospitals.

“A 20 minute drive from one to the other might not sound like much when you are sitting in Sydney, but if a patient is in labour or requires emergency care and has already travelled over 100 kilometres, it is an eternity and can have serious implications for the safety of the patient.

“History shows us that when a medical service to a country town is lost, it is lost forever. We cannot let this happen to these two towns. The current model of care for Parkes and Forbes ain't broke...so why fix it?”

Dr Dissanayake also said the idea that doctors from each town could provide on-call services to the other was completely unsustainable.

“These doctors already work long hours in the town they serve” he said. “Asking them to drive 40 minute round trips on country roads in the middle of the night is not only unfair, it is dangerous, particularly when they could expect to be making multiple overnight trips to the hospital for multiple cases” he said.

“There is a real danger that by downgrading one of these hospitals there will be an exodus of doctors from that town...and they will not necessarily be keen to move to the other. It is quite likely that the loss of doctors from one town will then place an unsustainable burden on doctors in the other town, resulting in a loss of doctors from there as well, all to the detriment of patient care.

“Statewide, the NSW Government and its health bureaucrats need to recognise that threatened cuts to rural hospitals badly impact on the morale of local doctors, many of whom provide 24/7 care to their communities. Morale can erode to such a point that doctors will decide they cannot continue to provide that level of care, with the associated impact on their personal lives. Governments should be pulling out all stops to ensure that point is not reached...and that means better supporting local doctors and local healthcare services.

“We urge NSW Labor to match the Coalition, and ensure a certain future for healthcare in the Lachlan Valley.”

Available for interview: Dr Tilak Dissanayake on 0488 732 679.

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