



Tasmanian Health Conference 2014

Speech delivered by Cassy O'Connor MP, Greens Health spokesperson

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Medical Sciences Precinct, University of Tasmania, Hobart

Good morning everyone.

Distinguished guests and health professionals, Dr Greenaway, Graham Lynch and my fellow panelists ... Minister ... It's good to be here. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Tasmanian Greens and thank you, in advance, for listening.

Before I begin, I wish to pay my respects to Tasmania's First People, the palawa pakana. To Aboriginal elders, past and present, I pay my deepest respects and I acknowledge the palawa pakana as the original owners and custodians of this beautiful island, lutruwita - Tasmania.

Minister, as do I'm sure many people here today, I welcome your commitment to structural reform, to strengthen clinical engagement in reform, and your announcement that the three THOs will become one. I hope that as a result, we'll see a more sensible, efficient and - hopefully strategically statewide - approach to governance, administration, procurement and purchasing in our health system.

That said, there are legitimate concerns about the proposed location of the restructured Tasmanian Health Service in Launceston. The critical mass of expertise within the Department of Health and Human Services is in the South, along with our only major tertiary hospital, the Royal. It is logical for the new THS, to be located in the State's capital and centre of health teaching and tertiary treatment in Tasmania.

I appreciate this change will impact on staff and trust the process will be managed sensitively, and with care. We need to be clear and inclusive with staff and stakeholders. This decision will impact on staffing, it will lead to job losses, in an already very lean Department and health structure. That is a deeply regrettable outcome.

Minister, you were pretty coy when I brought this debate on in Parliament in June this year, but I do understand you had a process of engagement to go through. On the 'Team Tasmania' you describe, I also regard myself as a member. We'll support you in sensible strategic reform and challenge you, absolutely, where necessary.

These measures in train, I would imagine you now have other very serious matters to ponder and resolve as you contend with the heaviest assault on public health in living memory.

The first Abbott Budget ...

In a state with some of the worst individual and community health outcomes in the nation, a state where at least a third of the population are poor to very poor, the oldest and fastest ageing state in the nation, with the highest level of disability ... Tasmania has the most to lose if the Abbott Budget isn't re-shaped significantly by the Senate.

Right now, the Australian Senate is Tasmania's best friend. It's the best hope Tasmania's already strained health and hospital system, has. We all have a role to play in preventing the worst excesses of this Budget. In speaking up, engaging with our Tasmanian Senators and the



public debate.

I do recognize, Minister, that you have raised serious concerns with your Federal colleagues and I truly wish you well in your advocacy on behalf of Tasmanians.

Go in hard. Do.

You really have got a stinker on your hands ...

There's the \$80 billion cut nationally to public health over a decade, more than a billion of that in Tasmania ...

The Greens have long advocated a single funder model to stop the chronic underfunding and blame shifting, but the Abbott Government is taking it too far, too fast and without an articulated vision for the future that doesn't leave the states, and more importantly, health consumers, in the lurch. There doesn't seem to be a Plan A, let alone a Plan B. The arguments simply haven't been laid out. It is a form of shock tactics in my view.

- ... Then there's the abandonment of the National Partnership Agreement on Improving Public Hospital Performance which can only lengthen public hospital waiting lists and lead to a loss of valuable clinical professionals, unless the state can magic some extra hundreds of millions from somewhere
- ... the \$7 GP co-payment which will exacerbate chronic illness, put more pressure on a groaning public hospital system and leave, for example, a couple on an old age pension a projected \$200 a year worse off ..
- ... the dismantling of the outstanding Medicare Locals which are working at the local level, concentrating in areas of disadvantage, to ensure the delivery of the highest quality care and tangibly improving health outcomes Keeping people healthier, managing chronic disease and taking pressure of our emergency departments.
- ... and the staggeringly short-sighted move to abandon the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health ...

Some of my more delightful and physical outings as Human Services Minister were spent working out, then drinking tea with Chigwell and Claremont locals taking part in the fantastic, Glenorchy on the Go, program at Bucaan Neighbourhood House.

I heard so many stories of happier, more connected lives. Of healthier lives. I spoke to an older man, a widower, who had suffered a heart attack and bypass operation before joining the program. He reckons it saved his life. He was more active, leaner, he was having more fun.

He said his doctor was very happy about it all.

I haven't had an update, so I don't what is happening in this gentleman's life now but I hope he is happy and still walking for pleasure.

I do know, that Glenorchy on the Go, the outstanding Schools Canteen program and Move Well Eat Well - these great, health and life enhancing programs - were funded under the National Partnership which the Commonwealth has walked away from as of 30 June.

In my view, the first Abbott Budget places scant priority on the health of older Tasmanians, of disadvantaged families and young Tasmanians, school children who flourish - as we all do - with healthy diet and exercise, people living with disabilities and Tasmanians suffering from mental illness.

It would unquestionably widen the health gap between those who can afford and those who cannot.

All this in the context of existing and enduring poor health outcomes, across generations across the island. We have yet to address the systemic social and cultural determinants of the poor health of Tasmanians and the high level of chronic disease among low income, socially marginalized peoples.

In political terms, the frontline of health now is the Federal Budget, and the State Budget to be delivered on the 28th of August.

But in policy terms, there is a growing view among health and social policy analysts, that we need to completely rethink the way we do health.

We need to recognize and develop policy and programs across agencies that recognize health cannot be viewed in isolation from education, secure and affordable housing, employment, access to services, fresh food and transport. It cannot be viewed in isolation from the levels of disadvantage, discrimination and poverty in our community

We also need to recognize that some of our unhealthiest citizens are also our loneliest. That social isolation is life limiting and that connection to community is core to our wellbeing.

You only have to visit one of Tasmania's 34 terrific Neighbourhood Houses to appreciate how important a sense of belonging is.

It is also, I believe, core to our mental health. As Minister with responsibility for Housing, Family Support and Disabilities, I met far too many depressed or anxious, isolated people. Maybe they had Facebook, part of a community of sorts, but there is no replacement for face to face human contact, for touch, the look of warmth and care in someone's eyes.

Given the inadequate level of good policy and resourcing allocated to mental health, it is hard to escape the conclusion neither Federal nor State governments have placed enough importance on improving the lot of the one in five Tasmanians who suffers mental illness.

It is left to dedicated mental health professionals, counsellors, case workers and community sector organisations to do the best they can, making a tangible difference to the lives of individuals and families, but knowing there is a pressing need for increased resourcing and capacity.

And, for us to tackle the causes as well as the symptoms of poor mental health and chronic disease. To create a kinder, more equitable and inclusive Tasmania.

The World Health Organisation has clearly stated that there is enough evidence about the social determinants of health to act now.

As the Tasmanian Council of Social Services points out, unless we deal with the social

determinants of health, the pressure on our public health system will continue to exponentially increase to unsustainable levels ... consuming the entire, current state budget within a decade.

In its paper improving the prevention and management of chronic conditions, which is available online, the Department of Health and Human Services supports this view.

If we're really serious about the long term health of Tasmanians, we will need to invest in addressing social and economic inequity, reprioritize and increase funding to acute and primary care, in preventative health and healthy choices, housing and community services, education, public and active transport ... We need to do it all, methodically, steadfastly.

That is the core challenge of any government that wants to deliver a sustainable health system for Tasmania.

As a Green, I also understand, as most of us do, that we also need to nurture a healthy environment, clean air, soil and water chemicals and pesticides make people sick, we know that.

The return on investment - public and private - will take time, but it will save scarce health dollars in the medium to long term.

And, of course, we invest the promised Commonwealth and State dollars in remaking and rejuvenating the Royal for the future.

That marvellous little hospital where I had four beautiful babies without drugs at the Birth Centre, lost an appendix and discovered morphine ...

Our major tertiary hospital staffed by some of the best medical professionals in Australia, our teaching hospital ... the Royal, I believe, has a place in the hearts of so many Tasmanians. Its overworked, but committed staff deserve our gratitude and respect.

Minister, we all, I am sure, very much look forward to hearing when work will recommence on the Royal Hobart Hospital project.

As the Minister said, all our hospitals are central to our identity as a community.

We all await the first Hodgman Budget with great interest, to see how our new government responds to the immediate strife in health funding for the future and the long term sustainability challenges facing health in Tasmania.

Thank you.

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