

MEDIA RELEASE

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“WILL WE LOSE THE WISE WOMEN OF SMITHTON?”

Ruth Forrest MLC has warned the Government that the imminent withdrawal of maternity services at the North West Regional Hospital in Smithton, in far North West Tasmania, will remove birthing options for women in this region and will result in the loss of important midwifery skills and opportunities for the one GP in the region who provides an obstetric service to maintain the necessary skills.

“Women who choose to birth at Smithton Hospital are women who experience low risk pregnancies with no anticipated birthing problems. Whilst unexpected complications can and do occasionally arise, with appropriately trained and skilled midwives and doctors and an efficient transfer/retrieval system, the outcomes for these women are very good” Ms Forrest said.

“Women will continue to present in established labour to our smaller regional hospitals including the West Coast and at times the birth will be imminent and transfer prior to birth impossible. To ensure women and babies receive a high level of care in these settings, midwives and doctors need to maintain their skills by regular updating and ‘hands-on’ experience” Ms Forrest stated.

The situation at Smithton Hospital peaked to crisis point as a result of the continual shortage of midwives, and inability to maintain staffing levels during periods of leave, resulting in insufficient qualified staff to maintain a roster. Ms Forrest calls on the Government of provide much needed support to the Circular Head community and urgently implement several strategies to address these issues and ensure the women of Circular Head continue to have the option of birthing close to home when safe to do so.

“Initiatives such as providing ongoing, funded, experiential training opportunities for midwives or nurses wishing to undertake midwifery training, sharing of human resources with the two other hospitals that make up the ‘One North West Regional Hospital’ in three, not two, campuses, implementing midwifery led models of care and ensuring the regional position of the Clinical Educator in Midwifery is truly regional and includes midwives working in Smithton” Ms Forrest suggested.

Federal Government initiatives provide opportunities for rural doctors to undertake ongoing training with \$15,000 per annum to cover costs of a locum, accommodation

whilst undertaking training and their salary. If a registered nurse wishes to upgrade her skills to include midwifery from a home base of Smithton, they must leave the area, pay \$15,000 to complete the course and have no income during this time. "The State Government is responsible for maternity services in Tasmania and should implement a similar program to support the further education of nurses wishing to undertake midwifery training and upgrading/updating of midwifery skills for midwives who work in rural and remote areas who receive limited exposure to clinical practice" Ms Forrest said.

"Midwifery models of care which enable midwives to provide continuity of care from antenatal care to labour and birth care and postnatal care should be supported and implemented in the regional hospitals to ensure midwives continue to maintain the full scope of skills and experience in all areas of maternity care" Ms Forrest stated.

"Traditionally the midwife was considered the 'wise woman' of the community and small communities such as Smithton rely on these wise women as they are often involved throughout the life of people in these communities" Ms Forrest concluded.

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For further information, please phone 0419 879 524.