

A Position Statement on the Crisis In Tasmania's Public Health Care System

by Tasmanian members of the Social Education and Research for Humanity (SEARCH) Foundation, the Tasmanian Public and Environmental Health Network (TPEHN) and other activists, November 2011.

The Immediate Crisis

Global, national and local economic pressures seriously impacted the State of Tasmania in 2011. This led to severe cutbacks in funding to the state's health care system. At the same time large amounts of public money were spent on corporate welfare and bankrolling sporting events such as car racing, horse racing and football.

Tasmania is the poorest state of Australia with the nation's highest rates of cancer, heart disease and diabetes. It also has the lowest number of doctors per capita in the nation. Prior to 2011 the state's health care system was described as mediocre, with long waiting lists for elective surgery stretching to years. Waiting times in our emergency departments had blown out of control and assistance from community mental health services was only available to those in most dire need. People presenting at accident and emergency often had long waits for treatment. From this already stressed system it was decided to cut \$100 million. \$60 million is to be cut from elective surgery over three years and one quarter of public hospital beds in the state will be closed at a time when occupancy rates are between 97% and 100%. Mental health services are also being slashed.

The Tasmanian Government has not made a case of wastage or mismanagement in the health care system, so we must conclude the health cutbacks are simply a political decision based on government priorities. Expenditure on public health is an investment in the future. We must not let some unjustifiable desire to avoid a budget deficit stand in the way of sharing the cost of this investment with future generations through incurring debt.

These cutbacks to health care must be stopped, because the Government of Tasmania will inevitably cause the deaths of people they were elected to care for. What kind of perverse economic or political system decides the most vulnerable members of our community have now become dispensable simply to 'balance the books'?

This behaviour is even classified as an illness itself. This extreme economic rationalism is often called 'psychopathic'. There is no place for the economic rationalisation of fundamental human rights in a civilised society. Government officials have invented mechanisms to disconnect themselves from the responsibility of their actions but they must be held accountable.

It is no accident that the amounts of money that were siphoned away from public health are the same amounts now being forcefully recovered at the expense of the most vulnerable in our community. To think for one moment that the duty of care accepted by anyone that stands for public office has now become a discretionary expenditure that can be shifted to more popular or exciting activities is an act of extreme ignorance. To hope that gambling public assets on private corporations and commodity futures will somehow benefit the whole community is naive and outside the mandate of the public official. Economic reports commissioned by the health unions show that the loss of jobs in the public sector will have a flow-on effect into the private sector, further depressing the economy. As skilled health care professionals are forced to leave the state with their families, it will be very hard to recruit them back in the long run, further exacerbating and extending our health care crisis into the future.

The system is dysfunctional and must be reconstructed with health delivery the main priority. We believe that the Tasmanian Government must now accept their responsibilities and realise they have lost their way. They must act immediately before more lives are lost and the health system itself crashes.

Actions that must be taken immediately by the Government include:

- (1) Reverse the health cuts so that there is no frontline loss of services including no bed closures and no decrease in elective surgery.
- (2) Re-vamp all health services in Tasmania including Mental Health, Drug and Alcohol, Disability and Child Services.
- (3) Develop preventative holistic health strategies and put them in place within six months alongside and working with the re-vamp of acute care services
- (4) Minimise the health bureaucracy and make it more accountable to the directions and input of grassroots clinical staff, patients and families.

Questions we believe need to be addressed as matters of extreme urgency include:

1. Management practices

Despite government denial that there are serious management problems the fact is that service providers and receivers have pointed to serious bungling by health bureaucracies, resulting in inefficient use of resources and prolonged suffering by patients.

2. Environmental and Preventative Health

Campaigns to reduce the exposure of Tasmanians to toxic and other unhealthy substances could save money in the longer term. It also needs to be recognised that there are many social and environmental factors affecting Tasmanians'

physical and mental health. These include over-use of pesticides, irresponsible use of dangerous substances such as asbestos and materials used for food storage, psychological stress brought about ultimately by intergenerational poverty, dietary problems through a combination of poverty and inadequate education, alcohol abuse and many others.

3. Equipment and Services

The geographic distribution of high-tech medical equipment and specialist services needs to be looked at in an open public discussion, involving health workers and consumers. This must also include discussion of the merits of retaining regional hospitals to provide basic care.

4. Budgetary Priorities

Health funding in Tasmania today cannot be seen as separate from the world economic situation. Until governments take notice of those (from acclaimed economists such as JK Galbraith to the leaders of the Occupy movement) who have been advocating the abandonment of an unreasoned obsession with budget surpluses and the imposition of increased taxes on the super-rich, as well as government funded stimulus to the economy, there will not be enough money for public health and the fostering of a healthy, socially just society. We join with the health workers and Tasmanians from all walks of life who are raising their voices and calling for this.

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