

RURAL DOCTORS ASSOCIATION (NSW) INC

Media release – 14 November 2008

Crowd spills out the door at public meeting to protest downgrade of Pambula Hospital

Residents from across the south east of New South Wales came out in force last night to protest the closure of Pambula Hospital's maternity unit and demand the restoration of services at the hospital.

Over 800 people spilled out of the doors of the Pambula Town Hall and into the streets to hear speakers call for the return of maternity and other life saving services, including emergency theatre and the care of children at Pambula hospital.

Rural Doctors Association of NSW Secretary Dr Paul Mara said residents made their views loud and clear and it is now imperative the Health Minister John Della Bosca and the Greater Southern Area Health Service urgently reinstate the maternity unit and restore the downgraded hospital services.

"Mr Della Bosca and the Rees Government must call a halt to the downgrading of rural hospital services across the State," Dr Mara said.

"Last month Pambula had a maternity service well staffed by six local GP Obstetricians; it was closed because there were not enough nurses. But now we have a situation where the closest maternity unit does not have enough doctors – this is ridiculous.

"Based on the logic used – in the recent Bega Valley maternity services review - to close the Pambula obstetric unit, nearly every other non-specialist maternity unit in rural New South Wales would also need to close.

"The community is up in arms about what's happening to their hospital and have shown they want local doctors who are committed to their community treating them," Dr Mara said.

Addressing the lively meeting, local GP obstetrician Dr Rob Morton – who resigned as a Visiting Medical Officer in protest at the maternity unit closure - said he had seen the slow degradation of services at Pambula Hospital over the last five years escalate in the previous six months.

"Currently the Hospital won't admit children, including in one case a patient with pneumonia and needing palliative - possibly terminal - care. Instead that patient and their family must travel to Bega for care," Dr Morton said.

"The hospital is also denying admission to anyone who is very sick and needing close nursing care or cardiac monitoring and it has put a stop to emergency surgery taking place, even when the medical and nursing skills are available.

"The consequences of this are often very personal and disturbing, with women who need a medically simple procedure, such as a curette for a miscarriage, being sent to Bega, along with their loved ones in such a time of crisis."

Dr Morton said he was extremely encouraged by the support shown by the community at last night's meeting.

"It vindicates the stand local doctors have taken, and shows we need the hospital here. We can't let hospital services degrade while we wait to see if the State Government builds a new hospital in the area or not. Even if a new hospital was funded tomorrow, it could still be years away from opening.

"Residents in this area, and the many visitors who flock to our region, need to be provided with a viable health service right now."

The meeting, organised by Pambula Chamber of Commerce and supported by the RDA NSW, agreed to hold a large public demonstration in support of the hospital in Merimbula later this month.

Available for interview:

RDA NSW Secretary Dr Paul Mara on 0412 486 536 and Pambula GP Obstetrician Dr Rob Morton on 0428 246 903

Media contact: Lara Cole on 0421 202 643