

RURAL DOCTORS ASSOCIATION (NSW) INC

'Caring for the Country'

Media release
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Doctors urge NSW Health Minister to prevent “disgraceful closure” of Pambula maternity unit

Pregnant women to be forced to drive 2 hours to give birth

The Rural Doctors Association of NSW (RDA NSW) is urgently calling on the new NSW Health Minister, John Della Bosca MP, to prevent the “disgraceful closure” of Pambula Hospital’s maternity unit on the state’s south coast.

Closure of the unit will see pregnant women from as far south as Mallacoota being forced to travel 2 hours during labour to the next closest maternity unit at Bega Hospital—travel time which the Association warns will lead to an increased risk of maternal or child deaths, and roadside births on the busy Princes Highway.

Local GP obstetrician, Dr Rob Morton, has announced that he will tender his resignation immediately as a Visiting Medical Officer (VMO) at Pambula Hospital—and will cease VMO duties in December—unless there is a guarantee that maternity services will be reinstated permanently there. Other VMOs at the Hospital are also strongly considering resigning.

A memo today from a Greater Southern Area Health Service manager announced that “effective immediately, all maternal services will be provided at Bega Hospital for the period 9th September 2008 through to and including 20th October 2008” and that “a review of these interim maternal arrangements in the Bega Valley will be undertaken mid October to determine the appropriateness and feasibility of returning to the alternating model of care.” The manager has cited changes in the availability of nursing and medical staffing as the primary reason for the decision to provide maternity services at Bega Hospital only.

“The temporary closure of Pambula Hospital’s maternity unit is clearly the first step towards its permanent closure—we’ve seen this happen so many times in other rural communities across NSW it’s not funny” RDA NSW President, Dr Les Woollard, said.

“First an Area Health Service makes nursing and midwifery staff unavailable to provide the service, then they say there aren’t enough staff to keep the service running, and then they close the service ‘temporarily’ with a promise to assess a reopening of the service down the track—but this never seems to happen.

“There are enough highly trained GP obstetricians, GP anaesthetists and midwives available at Pambula Hospital to keep this service running. And while there is a shortage of theatre staff, this is only because the Area Health Service has sent these staff to Bega Hospital! They could be returned to Pambula Hospital within half an hour if the Area Health Service didn’t have an ulterior motive of wanting to close down this essential local service.

“Pambula Hospital has a population drainage area of about 18,000 people, and there are approximately 120-140 deliveries there each year—this demonstrates that the Hospital and its maternity unit are meeting a significant local need.

“Dr Morton has been a GP obstetrician and anaesthetist in Pambula for 20 years. As a VMO at Pambula Hospital, he provides emergency medical care, anaesthetics and inpatient care. His resignation—and that of other VMOs—will be a significant loss to the hospital, its patients and the entire region.

“The NSW Government and NSW Department of Health are obviously not content with seeing 50% of the state’s rural maternity units closed within the past 12 years. They continue to cry ‘safety’ as being the reason for closing these services, despite research showing time and time again that, for low risk births, small maternity units are safer places to give birth.

“It is ironic that this situation at Pambula Hospital should occur the day after the Federal Government issued a discussion paper on its review to improve maternity services in Australia. One of the review’s main aims is to improve access to maternity services for rural women.

“We urge Minister Della Bosca to immediately commit to save Pambula Hospital’s maternity unit from closure and also make a strong commitment to ensure the future of rural maternity services across the state.”

Available for interview: Dr Rob Morton and Dr Les Woollard.

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