

Message to our Members

Last week the Network's Chairperson Dr Duncan Steed and CEO Paul West attended a meeting held by the Australian General Practice Network with all the Chairs and CEOs from across Australia. With the federal election a week away, it was an opportunity to discuss the ramifications of the policies proposed by the major parties and to underscore that, no matter the result, there is a need for primary health care reform. If the Gillard Government is returned, the likelihood is that this reform will involve the adoption of some of the recommendations of the Hospital and Health Commission. This would involve significantly increased funding delivered through primary care, taking some of the focus from the state and the hospital and acute sector.

The mechanism for delivering this funding, programs and services would be Primary Health Care Organisations dubbed 'Medicare Locals' in the budget. Eventually these organisations would take on many of the services and programs delivered by other providers such as the Allied Health provided currently by WACHS. Although described as having evolved from Divisions of General Practice, they will be much larger organisations, taking in a greater population mass and geographical area. For instance the population covered by the existing eight rural Divisions of General Practice in WA would be enveloped by just two Primary Health Care Organisations.

Wheatbelt GP Network has grave concerns as to whether such an organisation would provide adequate local services, program delivery and representation. This concern is shared by the majority of WA's rural Divisions. To this end it has lobbied that, under such an arrangement, Wheatbelt GP Network should remain as a local service and program delivery provider, not dissimilar to the Regional Offices maintained by WACHS. The Network would retain its Constitution and Membership.

Over the past two years in particular, the Network has strived to adjust to the reduction and constriction of the parameters of the contracts from its traditional funders, while endeavoring to remain relevant to its Membership. The employment of a Pharmacist to undertake Home Medicine Reviews was the first example of providing a service that was not pre-funded by a service delivery contract. No longer able to afford the travel and hotel accommodation involved in previous annual events, the Network has changed the way CPD events are delivered. The recent events held in Northam, such as Cultural Awareness Training, are examples of how the Network can deliver relevant and beneficial programs economically and locally.

The Network has long been involved in working with local government authorities and individual GPs to maintain the delivery of sustainable General Practice. With increased difficulties in recruiting GPs and the changing preferred model of General Practice of the new generation of doctors, the Network has worked with WACHS, GPs and local authorities to find new and sustainable solutions. As a part of this, the Network has commenced the management of several General Practices in towns with an otherwise unaddressed need.

It has also undertaken a comprehensive scoping study and planning exercise pertaining to the establishment of a purpose-built Comprehensive Primary Health Care Centre in Northam. Located adjacent to the Northam Regional Hospital, this centre would be a training hub for students and Registrars, provide an easy entry, gracious exit strategy for the town's long standing doctors and a regional centre from which smaller outlying Practices may be supported. The study found that there was a great need for such a centre and the concept was picked up as a election promise by the Labor Government. Confident of the viability of such a centre the Network will proceed with the concept regardless of the outcome of the election.

With the building and the rental return from its retail and office space, the management of the large practice involved, the existing practices, the rent from the Network's houses and Northam Allied Health Rooms, the income from the Pharmacist and other fee for service type arrangements will go along way to ensure that regardless of the details of Primary Health Care reform, Wheatbelt GP Network will still be in a position to provide services and support to its Members.