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COUNTRY HEALTH CARE PLAN

Mr GRIFFITHS (Goyder) (15:18): I wish to take a few brief minutes this afternoon to talk about the Country Health Care Plan, and I am pleased that the Minister for Health is still in the chamber. I think it is fair to say that there has been enormous concern in regional South Australia since the release of the Country Health Care Plan on 5 June. I know that, in my electorate office, I have received numerous telephone calls and emails. Letters have come in and people have come to see me. Whenever I am in the street talking to people it is all about, 'What is happening to our hospitals?' People want to know.

It is interesting that, during question time today, the Minister for Health in answer to a question asked by the member for Bragg made an accusation that the Liberal opposition was interested in only the politics of the matter. I can assure the Minister for Health that we are not interested in the politics: we are interested in the services on the ground to our communities that we serve. We are all here because we want to make sure that our hospitals remain open and that they receive the widest possible range of services. However, there is a great concern that the people will not get that with the Country Health Care Plan.

In the Goyder electorate, the proposal is that the Yorketown, Maitland and Balaklava hospitals (which have existed for many years and which have done tremendous work in those communities and for the communities that surround those towns) will become GP Plus centres. We have used the term 'bandaid centres', and that is a fairly true description. It is that sort of expression that really is concerning people, and that is why we are all getting calls about it.

The Wallaroo Hospital in my electorate will retain the focus of a country community hospital, which, as I understand it, will mean that people will be admitted only for observation within the GP Plus centres but then will be required to be transferred to either Wallaroo or Adelaide. That just does not always work. I want to emphasise a few sentences from a letter I received late last week from a person from Stansbury.

Unfortunately, her husband died in March earlier this year. He had been ill for some time. He had been in and out of hospital and, when he finally went into hospital for his last days, it made the world of difference to her, her husband and their family that he was in a hospital where staff knew him, cared for him and showed true devotion in attending to his needs, and it was close enough for her to visit her husband on a daily basis.

This lady lives at Stansbury, which is only about 20 kilometres away from Yorketown. If this man had had to be admitted to Wallaroo Hospital—or even worse, Adelaide—it would have meant either that she would have to move to those communities to be with her husband or that she would have to make daily trips to see him. She pointed out to me that it is just impossible when you are a pensioner, as was their case, to be able to afford to travel that distance.

I do not think that the Country Health Care Plan will work. The people who I am speaking to are not interested in it. They recognise, though, that while the emotional argument will come out all the time—and people use emotion when they are concerned about the devolution of services in their area—any possibility of changing will involve having to look at the facts, too.

I had some interesting telephone calls from people in my electorate last night about this. One man from Warooka, whose wife is an ambulance volunteer, told me that his wife has been a volunteer for only about two years. She also works as a nurse at the hospital. The concern at the moment is that, when she is called out for an ambulance requirement, there is probably about a three-hour turnaround from when she leaves home to when she returns.

If they suddenly find that those people have to be called out to transport people from southern Yorke Peninsula to Wallaroo Hospital or to an Adelaide hospital on a regular basis, where they can be admitted, it will be something like an eight-hour turnaround. His comment to me was that she would resign immediately. These ambulance brigades in regional communities are struggling to have the numbers they need to provide services now. We need to make sure that we put in place health care plans that allow services to be available locally and for volunteer services, like the ambulance service, not to have to spend a full day transporting people to hospitals that they should not have to go to.

Yorke Peninsula is a growth area extending from the Adelaide Plains. People are moving there because they are making the seachange choice. Retirees are moving there, but a strong focus for the reason to move there is the fact that the range of services is good. The health services and hospitals that are provided are an important factor. If you do not have those, what will happen to the regions? Why are people moving to these country towns? They will be fearful that, if they get sick, they will not be close to a doctor and they will decide not to come. Already I have had comments about the fact that GPs will leave the area and that it will be impossible to recruit GPs and keep the trained staff. There are so many concerns here.

The rally tomorrow on the steps of Parliament House will be an opportunity for regional South Australians to make known to the government of this state what they think about the proposal. I am holding a public meeting in my electorate on Tuesday of next week. I am expecting a lot of people to attend and, hopefully, I will have some GPs speaking. I am giving Country Health SA an opportunity to present the country health plan and, more importantly, an opportunity for them to be told very clearly what the people in the regions want. I can tell you it is not the plan. They want the retention of their hospitals; they want to make sure that the doctors and nurses are going to be there. They want to make sure that the full range of services they currently receive are continued; otherwise they will not accept the plan. I think that, with one stroke of the pen, the government has made a crazy decision, which will react against it enormously.