

Western Australian government cuts hospital beds and jobs

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As part of an escalating assault on public health by Australian state and federal governments, the Western Australian Liberal government is slashing jobs and beds at two public hospitals in Perth and shelving the planned expansion of a newly-built facility.

The state Health Department announced in February that 250 full-time public health jobs would be eliminated at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital (SCGH), a major tertiary hospital in the capital's western suburbs, and at the Osborne Park Hospital in the northern suburbs. Forty-eight beds will be closed at SCGH, or 8 percent of the hospital's current 615 beds.

Professor Bryant Stokes, Western Australia's acting director general of health, claimed that "patient activity" at the two hospitals was "not increasing" and "existing staffing levels are not suited to current activity levels." Shane Kelly, chief executive of the North Metropolitan Health Service, which has responsibility for both hospitals, insisted that patient care would not be affected, even though the job cuts would be achieved by reducing the average length of "patient stays."

Michael Gannon, vice president of the Western Australian branch of the Australian Medical Association (AMA), ridiculed these claims, saying it was "laughable" to suggest that the hospital could close beds and still meet its emergency and elective surgery targets. The AMA pointed out that the state was already around 400 beds short, with the state's population of 2.7 million increasing by about 1,000 people per week.

According to 2012 health department figures, there are about 47,000 people on the state's public hospital specialists' waiting lists. The department's figures for last year revealed that more than 6,000 "elective surgery" cases were cancelled due to emergency cases taking priority, a lack of beds, staff and available

operating theatres.

Premier Colin Barnett's government is also planning to eliminate about 300 beds from the newly-built \$2 billion Fiona Stanley Hospital (FSH) at Murdoch, in Perth's southern suburbs. The flagship hospital remains empty of patients due to ongoing delays and technical problems associated with its information technology systems.

The FSH was originally commissioned by the previous state Labor government, which promised that the hospital would open in 2011 with 610 beds, and that a second stage would increase bed capacity to 1,058 beds by 2015. Labor, which was voted out of office at the 2008 state election, planned to shut Royal Perth Hospital, a major tertiary hospital, once the FSH was completed.

The FSH's opening has now been delayed to October this year, with the transfer of the State Rehabilitation Hospital from Shenton Park to the new Murdoch site. It will not be fully operational until April 2015, with 783 beds, almost 300 less than originally planned.

The Barnett government's move to shelve the hospital's planned second stage has received little coverage in the local press and no comment from the state Labor opposition. The FSH bed cuts were revealed in late February by the *Australian*, which reported that the decision was buried in an 80-page report released by the Health Department about the provision of public health services between 2010 and 2020.

These measures follow the slashing of health programs in other states, driven by the cuts initiated by the previous federal Labor government. In 2012, New South Wales cut \$3 billion from its health budget over four years, Queensland \$1.6 billion, and Victoria \$616 million.

The Barnett government, like its counterparts in other states, has also axed jobs in vital social services during the past year. These include some 500 jobs from the public education system, including 350 education assistants' jobs, a "freeze" on the hiring of teachers and a \$180 million cut to the education budget. All government departments, including health, education and welfare services, now face an annual 2 percent "efficiency dividend"—bureaucratic jargon for a 2 percent annual budget cut.

These measures are an attempt to satisfy the global credit ratings agencies, which have criticised the Barnett government's public spending and rising debt levels, and questioned whether it had the "political will" to impose the austerity measures demanded by the corporate elite.

Before he resigned in unclear circumstances last month, state Treasurer Troy Buswell told the media: "Last year one of the ratings agencies said (we didn't) have the political ticker to do hard things and they were probably right. But I'll give you a tip. I don't think they will be saying that for much longer." Buswell's comments indicate that the health, education and other social services cuts are the first of many to come.

The health sector unions—the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), Health Services Union and United Voice—have opposed any mobilisation of their members to defend public health jobs and bed numbers.

ANF state secretary Mark Olson told the media that he knew nothing about the FSH bed cuts. He offered a perfunctory protest, pointing out the obvious—that the reduction in bed numbers would put "more pressure" on nurses and the health system, and put patients' lives at risk.

The unions insist that these attacks are simply the product of the "neo-conservative" agendas of Barnett and the federal Liberal government, seeking to sow illusions that the job and bed cuts would ease with the return of Labor governments.

In fact, the cuts flow directly from the former federal Labor government's "healthcare reform" program, which sought to drive down public health spending, including by tying all hospital funding to "national efficient price determinations," and shifting more health services and procedures to profit-making private providers.



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