

Australia: Sydney residents protest downgrading of Mona Vale Hospital

John Wilson, John Harris
2 March 2019

Fifty residents from Sydney's northern beaches suburbs gathered outside the downgraded Mona Vale Hospital (MVH) last month to protest against moves to demolish some of its buildings. The protest followed a meeting of 450 residents on February 4 to demand the restoration of its services.

The fight is continuing in the lead up to the March 23 New South Wales state election, which has elicited empty promises from the major parties to defend public healthcare.

The state's Liberal-National government transferred hospital-level services last year to the new, privately-run Northern Beaches Hospital (NBH), over 13 kilometres away. MVH is situated on prime real estate, facing the Mona Vale beach and backing onto a golf course.

At the February 4 meeting the local state Liberal member of parliament, Rob Stokes, promised that the hospital site would be "preserved" for use as a healthcare facility but after the meeting re-iterated that he did not support the return of the hospital. He was jeered by the crowd.

A statement from the Greens party health spokesperson, Dawn Walker, was read to the February 4 meeting and concluded by calling for the "full restoration of Mona Vale Hospital," eliciting a cheer from most of the audience. However, the Greens have given no details about how this is to be done.

The Labor Party sent no representative to the meeting and has backed the relocation of services to the new hospital. On February 18, its health spokesman Walt Secord told Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* that if Labor won it would "not rule out" taking over the NBH, but only promised to "examine the contract." He made no commitment to examine other privatised hospitals, despite pledging "no further privatisations of hospitals

or health services."

The nursing trade union openly defended privatisation at the meeting. While feigning sympathy for the residents, NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) official Dennis Ravlich said: "Private hospitals have an important role to play." He admitted that the "the union is working with Healthscope [the operator of NBH]."

The NSWNMA, like the other health unions, has collaborated with the privatisation process carried out by Labor and Liberal-National state and federal governments over the past 30 years.

Surgeon and Associate Professor Richard West, who lives in the area and works at Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, told the meeting residents wanted to see at least a Level 3 Emergency Department, which would involve reopening intensive care, operating theatres and beds.

Save Mona Vale Hospital Committee chairman Parry Thomas told a suburban newspaper, the *Manly Daily*, that the area needed a hospital with an emergency department, "including surgery, maternity [and] intensive care, to service the remoteness of the community of the northern beaches."

The hospital's emergency department was closed in October and replaced with an Urgent Care Centre (UCC), which Thomas described as "a bandaid station." The UCC only has the capacity to deal with minor fractures, sprains and cuts, dehydration, mild asthma and sporting injuries. All other patients, including surgery, emergency and maternity, must go to the new hospital.

The recent protests are part of a decades-long campaign to defend the hospital. As the full implications of the degradation of the health services have become clear, broader support has emerged. A

rally held last October was attended by 1,000 people.

The NBH is operated under a public-private partnership between Healthscope and the state government. Healthscope is Australia's second-largest private hospital operator, employing some 18,000 workers across the country.

According to the 2014 Public Private Partnership Contract Summary, over the life of the hospital, the agreement would save \$1.5 billion compared to a government-built and operated public hospital, including cutting 30 percent from operating costs.

These "savings" will come from reduced staff wages and numbers. This is already apparent at the new facility. The WSWS reported last December that the new hospital "lacked sufficient doctors and nurses and was not equipped to provide safe, quality care" and "many of the staff members had not received proper training on the hospital's equipment."

Employees who transferred from MVH to the new hospital have been guaranteed only a job and conditions for two years. Visiting Medical Officers (VMOs) have had their pay cut by 8.7 percent.

WSWS reporters interviewed some participants at the February 4 meeting.

Debbie, a doctor's assistant from Newport, said the government's "true intentions really are to get rid of the whole thing. They want the real estate, that's their agenda. That's what I believe and I've believed that for over 25 years. I tried to save this hospital before my son was born and he is 25 now."

Debbie commented: "I knew that it [the NBH] was privately owned, it was never ever going to become a public hospital ... No government was ever going to fund it ... it is all about the money, there's nothing in it about the community."

Asked if this decision was bound up with the broader privatisation of healthcare, Debbie said: "Definitely, it's a sad move that the government is letting it happen. They are encouraging it to happen, for sure... Both major parties are doing it. Over the past 30 years, no government has wanted to get involved. It was just more lies, fobbing the community off and a lot of money spent in consultation."

Debbie said the "hospital should be reversed back to what it used to be and even upgraded" because of new housing estates. "How are we supposed to accommodate the community if it's a skeleton staff at

Mona Vale and a skeleton staff at Northern Beaches Hospital?"

Sue, 53, a member of the Save Mona Vale Hospital Committee, said the downgraded MVH was in crisis. "The amount of people that are showing up per day is over 80. When they moved to turn the facility into an urgent care facility, they thought they might have 30 people or so present a day."

Sue disputed Stokes's assurances at the meeting that there was no contractual restriction on extra services at MVH. She noted that Healthscope had told its shareholders about the residents' opposition. "So, this was a concern to them before they even took the contract on. They aren't likely to have gone ahead with it unless there was a guarantee that there would be less competition."

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