

JESSICA PAGE

Rev up hospital upgrades

Uber rich WA must put crucial emergency department projects on fast track



Roger Cook finally said it. Now the question is whether anyone in Canberra was listening when he directed a brick their way. "They need to do better on aged care," the Premier said. "Today we have upwards of 250 people sitting in our hospitals waiting for an aged-care bed."

The Premier was keen to share the pain, after returning from leave to face days of front-page headlines about a record no one in WA should be proud of.

Ambulances stranded, with patients on board and no spare beds to admit them to, for a collective 7009 hours in July.

The Federal Aged Care Minister's response was underwhelming.

"Every day an older Australian spends in hospital when they should be in a more appropriate environment puts more pressure on their wellbeing and more pressure on the hospital system that supports them," Sam Rae said.

"The Albanese Labor Government is investing almost \$60 million to help older West Australians out of hospital beds and back into their home or aged care — keeping them in a familiar, comfortable environment for as long as possible."

That's it. Not enough money. No real commitment to do better.

We already know the barriers to discharging older people. We already know the solutions.

More residential aged-care beds are needed now, not later.

Ditto homecare packages.

A new round of capital funding is due to be announced in September and needs to offer WA a way out of this mess.

A \$15m hospital avoidance program providing in-reach allied health services for seniors at home in Broome, Albany, Geraldton and Bunbury is good.

But not good enough. Ditto the State Government's 100 hospital at home beds.

And, sorry Premier, it's not an either/or situation. We need more hospital beds too. WA has the second lowest rate of beds per capita of any State or Territory.

Former AMA WA president (and fellow Page 13 columnist) Andrew Miller spelled out in clearer language than any politician exactly what that means.

"Any delay in access to diagnosis and treatment

increases bad outcomes and increases deaths," he said.

Dr Miller went on a fact-checking spree and called the Premier's bluff.

Code yellows a "normal" part of patient flow? "Running unsafe hospitals is in no way a normal situation."

Patients waiting 12 hours must not be urgent? "They can deteriorate very rapidly and then take more time to sort out, even if they don't have a complication and die as a result of the delay."

Labor has added 900 beds since 2021. Doesn't it deserve credit for that? "A bit of tricky accounting," Dr Miller said.

"Some of them are beds that have been mothballed previously and then reopened. It's pretty obvious to everybody who drives past an emergency department and sees all these ambulances waiting that they haven't opened enough."

Roger Cook has been caught out because he promised but couldn't deliver on his decade-old pledge to fix ramping.

Ramping might be a nationwide problem but there's a key difference.

WA has a Budget in surplus and can afford to do better. A growing and ageing population has revealed a lack of forward

planning, at both a State and Federal level.

Labor is now in a third term in WA and a second term in Canberra and can't keep blaming previous governments while holding off on solutions.

All good things take time. WA Health boss Shirley Bowen said she couldn't "magic up a hospital" to cope with this flu season. But plans to expand hospital capacity have been moving too slowly.

Pressed on why there was no construction timetable, only funding for planning, for upgrades of Royal Perth Hospital and the Midland ED, Mr Cook effectively said it's the usual process.

"We announce these plans to build and then we work through the business case and the construction process."

Except the Burswood racetrack has full funding and an opening date, even without a business case.

Health must be on the same fast track.

Health Infrastructure Minister John Carey says building hospitals is more complicated. "They are very different projects," he said.

"You seem to be assuming that health projects are a walk in the park."

It is easier said than done. But Mr Carey is right about something else too.

"Governments can do more than one thing," he said. "West Australians expect us to build skills, do sport and recreational facilities and, of course, hospital infrastructure. Upgrading hospitals is a key priority of this Government."

Voters, and patients, want to see the finish line.

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