

# Bulk Billing GPs for our suburbs

Better access to health services  
through community health co-operatives

## The word on the ground

*"I have a family of four kids and quite often when one of them gets sick, I ring around the nearest doctor's practices and they say their books are closed or they can't get you in until next week. Sometimes there's just no choice but to go to Calvary and wait for hours in the queue."*

**Local mum**

*"I typically have to refer 2 to 3 customers to Calvary Hospital each weekday and 10 to 15 per day on a weekend."*

**Charnwood chemist**

*"Doctors face high insurance and set-up costs and are not keen on all the admin and paperwork. They would rather join another practice where there are already a few doctors and they can concentrate on being a doctor."*

**A Canberra GP**

*Comments from Charnwood Public Meeting and Community Survey (Feasibility Study, West Belconnen Community Health and Wellbeing Centre, 2006)*

## Canberra Liberals commit to West Belconnen GPs.

The Canberra Liberals recognise that primary health care is extremely important for aiding prevention of serious disease and sickness.

Unfortunately West Belconnen has an acute shortage of doctors. Indeed this is one of the toughest areas in metropolitan Australia in which to find a bulk billing doctor. It is also an area of Canberra that has high levels of social disadvantage.

Many residents in the area are not getting access to the medical services they need when they fall sick, while some in West Belconnen are commuting to Calvary Hospital and adding to the pressures on the accident and emergency department.

Private and commercially owned GP services have failed to fill the market gap and there has even been a decline of services in more recent times.

**A Canberra Liberal government will commit \$300,000 towards community owned health centres, including \$200,000 in extra funding to ensure the West Belconnen Health Centre Co-operative can commence operations without further delay.** This is on top of \$200,000 already made pledged to the Co-operative by the current ACT government.

**\$100,000 will be committed to gauge the feasibility of and community support for establishing community-owned health centres in Lanyon Valley and in other areas of bulk billing shortage in Canberra.**

We will work in partnership with the Community Health Committee, local community groups, doctors and other health professionals, to establish a medical practice facility in West Belconnen that can provide a mix of high quality health services and much-needed access to bulk billing.

In recent years the Commonwealth Government has published figures on bulk billed levels around Australia. In 2004 and 2005 the northern half of Canberra had the lowest level of bulk billing in the country (at 35.9% and 40.0% respectively for those two years).

A study published in late last year demonstrated that GP services are especially difficult to access in West Belconnen and bulk billing services are even harder to find in the area:

- The “Living on the Edge” Report found that there were just 11 GPs working in West Belconnen.
- Unfortunately the majority of these GPs were only operating on a part-time basis. One of the few full-time doctors was due to retire in November 2007 with no plans for a replacement.
- The survey found that the only medical practices in West Belconnen were located in Charnwood, Higgins, Kippax and Holt. Only two of these practices had their books open for new patients and none of these practices offered regular access to bulk billing.

Moreover in several suburbs of West Belconnen there were no medical practices at all. There are no medical practice facilities Macgregor, Dunlop, Latham, Flynn, Fraser or Melba. And there are no specialist medical services operating in West Belconnen.

In recent times there has been a closure of services. Another study in 2006 found that over the previous five years there had been closures of two General Practices at Charnwood, one at Macgregor and one on the border of Flynn and Charnwood.

Canberra as a whole has around one GP for every 849 people. By comparison West Belconnen has one GP to every 3,274 people. West Belconnen residents therefore have only around one quarter of the GP coverage that is enjoyed across Canberra as a whole.

Access to bulk billing is particularly important in West Belconnen, because of the high levels of disadvantage in the area. The 2006 census data shows that West Belconnen residents are over-represented on measures of low income levels, public housing, proportion of single parent families, and high levels of unpaid child care and unpaid carer work.

These measures of disadvantage are compounded by geographic isolation and transport challenges. A high share of households in the area do not have a motor vehicle, which is unusual in outlying parts of Canberra (the figures in West Belconnen are only matched elsewhere in Canberra around Town Centres where services are more accessible).

The Canberra Liberals have heard anecdotal reports from health professionals in the area that some residents who are sick are not making the commute to get access to the medical services they need. In some cases, residents from West Belconnen are taking the bus to Calvary Hospital and adding on the margins to pressures on the accident and emergency department.

More bulk billing doctors will not be a complete solution to the pressures on emergency departments. But they will assist, particularly in West Belconnen. The Canberra Liberals will have more to say in subsequent policies about emergency department resourcing and management.

The development of new housing around Dunlop will only add to pressure on local medical services in the area. Demographers expect that Dunlop is set to become the fifth largest suburb in the ACT (after Kambah, Ngunnawal, Gordon and Kaleen).

Despite plans by the ACT Government to continue urban expansion in Dunlop, this major suburb lacks facilities which are normally associated with an area of this size (shops, schools, community halls, sports fields and medical centres).

## Interstate Experience

The Charnwood proposal has drawn some of its inspiration from a co-operative model operating in Melbourne's western suburbs.

The South Kingsville Health Services Co-operative has expanded from one GP in 1980, to over 20 staff today providing services which have included GP care, dentistry, acupuncture and naturopathy. The cooperative has grown to 7,600 members and provides around 25,000 consultations per year. The service has annual turnover of around \$2 million

## The story so far.

The need for better access to doctors in West Belconnen has long been an issue of top concern for Belconnen residents and community groups.

In September 2004 a community meeting was held in West Belconnen to discuss widespread concern over the lack of GPs and bulk-billing services in the area. This meeting led to the establishment of the "Charnwood Community Health Committee" as a non-partisan group of volunteers, dedicated to finding solutions.

This group has surveyed 8,000 homes in North West Belconnen. The study found that 86% of respondents had difficulties getting appointments, 75% found it hard to get to a GP, 63% found GPs to be too expensive. These problems contributed to 18% not having a GP and 17% using Calvary Hospital as a substitute for visiting a local GP.

Of most concern, some research suggests that North West Belconnen residents are using the hospital emergency departments at a rate 27% above the average rate for the rest of the ACT. This reliance on the hospital system has been increasing over time and waiting times at Calvary have increased as a result.

Independent of government this community group has worked hard to develop a proposal for a viable health service. Without any real input from government, the group has:

- determined a viable model for a new medical practice;
- engaged an experienced practice manager to draw up a business plan for a staged roll out of a medical clinic;
- identified suitable premises;
- formally established a co-operative under the *ACT Co-operatives Act 2002* to run the health service; and

surveyed 8,000 residents, finding that 94 per cent would be prepared to pay a fee to join a health co-operative to get access to a bulk billing GP.

The Community Health Committee has identified suitable premises at the site of the former Charnwood High School and has negotiated in-principal agreement with the owners for occupancy. Furthermore, expressions of interest have been received from six GPs who would like to practice in the new centre

The Community Health Committee requires \$600,000 to establish a health clinic. To that end they have obtained pledges of financial support from members and community groups, to a total of around \$200,000. The ACT Government has pledged a further \$200,000.

However to commence operations, the co-operative requires a further investment of \$200,000 on top of funds already committed. The Community Health Committee has sought support from the federal Government towards start-up costs, but no funding has as yet been provided.

Locals in West Belconnen have struggled for three and a half years to obtain improved health services. Government and non-government organisations have made significant financial commitments towards a model which has widespread support in the community. A Canberra Liberal government will not allow federal government indecision to cause further delay.

**The Canberra Liberals pledge that if elected we will provide the balance of funds required as a one-off start-up grant to the co-operative.**

The ingenuity and initiative of locals in the West Belconnen area exemplifies the best characteristics in our community. These citizen activists are helping to redress a serious area of need and with one-off support from government their vision can be brought into reality.

The locals who have worked hard on this proposal will continue to provide long-term support for the service, through volunteer support and membership subscriptions.

Whilst the funding commitment from a Canberra Liberal Government will be significant, we expect that this service will stand on its own feet after its establishment and will generate significant dividends in the long term by helping improve health outcomes in West Belconnen.

## Funding

**A Canberra Liberal government will commit \$200,000 in extra funding to ensure the West Belconnen Health Centre Co-operative can commence operations without further delay.**

This represents the balance of funds required as a one-off start-up grant to establish the West Belconnen Co-operative. This is on top of \$200,000 already made pledged to the Co-operative by the current ACT government and will ensure total one-off government support of \$400,000.

**The additional \$200,000 support for the West Belconnen clinic is part of a \$300,000 Canberra Liberal commitment towards community owned health centres.**

We will provide the balance of funding to assess the feasibility of and public support for establishing community-owned centres in other areas of need in Canberra – such as the Lanyon Valley. Liberal MLAs for Brindabella Brendan Smyth and Steve Pratt will lead consultation with the community on development of a local solution to GP demand in the far south of Canberra.

The financing requirement is set out below:

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
<b>West Belconnen Community Health and Wellbeing Centre</b>	200			
<b>Feasibility Assessment of Lanyon Valley and other areas of GP and bulk billing shortage</b>	100			

If federal funding is subsequently provided to the West Belconnen proposal during 2008-09, then we will review the capitalisation needs of the West Belconnen service and may consider transferring a portion of the ACT Government funding towards start-up grants for other community-owned health clinics in the ACT.

We may transfer an amount up to the value of the Commonwealth contribution (for instance if the Commonwealth contributes \$100,000, then the total ACT Government contribution to the West Belconnen proposal may be reduced to \$300,000).

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