

Bulk Billing GP Clinics

After Hours in the Suburbs

Canberra**liberals**

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A Healthy Choice

Many aspects of the ACT health system are world class. However on a number of key indicators the ACT lags behind other states and territories. There are no easy answers however the Canberra Liberals believe that through sensible, targeted policies, real improvements can be made.

Despite Canberra's quality of life and its much hailed new medical school, our city has the worst elective surgery waiting lists in the country and second worst doctor shortage in the country (second to only the Northern Territory).

- According to the Productivity Commission's 2008 *Report on Government Services*, the ratio of GPs to population in Canberra is well below the level in every state.
- Under the Medicare system only \$189 per person is spent on GPs in Canberra, well below the level in every state.

Although access to affordable health care has become embarrassingly bad in Canberra, the Stanhope Government is not prepared to put after-hours GP services in the suburbs that need them the most. Health Minister Katy Gallagher admits there is a problem, but says it is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government to fix it.

"It's not that we're even close to the rest of the country in relation to bulk-billing and out of pocket expenses, we're way below." (ABC Online 13 May 2007)

The Canberra Liberals are not content to ignore the problems that the Stanhope Government has allowed under its watch. There are some real differences between the Canberra Liberals and the Stanhope Government when it comes to health. This policy package offers seven significant proposals to provide practical and fully-costed solutions to some of the most concerning problems in the ACT health system.

Real Solutions to Health System Failures	Canberra Liberals	Stanhope Labor
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• South Tuggeranong bulk billing GP service after hours from 6pm to 6am	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• West Belconnen bulk billing GP service after hours from 6pm to 2am	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gungahlin bulk billing GP service after hours from 6pm to 2am	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incentives to attract 60 GPs from interstate to plug the workforce shortfall in the ACT	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Guaranteed internship places to ANU Medical School Graduates	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help for young GPs to enter private practice	Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support commencement of a day-time bulk billing GP service in West Belconnen by providing the full \$400,000 required on top of private contributions.	Yes	No

Bulk Billing GP Clinics

The After-Hours Gap in the Market

The Canberra Liberals recognise that primary health care is extremely important for aiding prevention of serious disease and sickness. Local GPs and Medical Centres are at the front line of primary care and are important for nipping health problems in the bud. Effective local GP services help keep people out of the hospital system and help keep the overall costs of health services lower than they otherwise would be.

Unfortunately Canberra is the toughest capital city in Australia in which to find a bulk billing doctor. Year after year the ACT has been bottom of the interstate league when it comes to bulk billing.

- In 2006 only 48% of non-referred GP visits were bulk billed in the ACT.
- This was 14.2% below the next lowest state or territory result and 28.6% below the national average.

In recent years several private suburban GP clinics have been closing as GPs consolidate into large premises and into fewer locations.

The closure of the Wanniasa Medical Centre is the latest in a series of buy-outs and consolidation of private services.

Given the limited access to local GPs and difficulty in finding a practice which is open after hours, many Canberrans are commuting to the Hospital Emergency Departments thereby adding to the pressure on the accident and emergency staff. Some Canberrans are not even seeking medical assistance because they cannot find a local GP surgery that is open after hours and they think their sickness is not serious enough to trouble hospital staff with.

Residents of the ACT can get access to an after-hours GP service known as CALMS (Canberra Afterhours Locum Medical Service). This not-for-profit service is owned and operated by Canberra General Practitioners and, as such, patients are expected to pay for the service up front. Because this is not a bulk billing service, some Canberrans choose not to use it because they cannot afford the fees when they fall sick unexpectedly. CALMS is a valuable service, but it is far from a complete solution to the shortage of after-hours health services.

Modern Pressures, Modern Realities

Canberra is Australia's largest inland city and has a bitter winter climate. Much of our housing stock is poorly insulated and it is easy for children and senior residents to be battered around by the cold. Those who have greatest need for a bulk billing service include people who are often stretched financially – such as young families who are struggling to pay new mortgages and childcare costs, and elderly residents who find it difficult to pay unexpected bills on a pension or on superannuation.

It is often said that when people are sick, they should stay home to avoid contaminating their fellow workers in the workplace. But the harsh reality is that some people do battle on, for instance where they feel they have a heavy workload or are in the early stages of a cold or flu and think they can “shrug it off”. For a range of reasons some Canberrans unfortunately do not seek medical attention until after they leave work. Yet this is the time of day when services become hardest to find.

Often parents do not realise until after work, when they pick up their children from childcare or long-day care, that their children are coming down with an illness. And very often children wake in the night with fevers or symptoms of illness that were not fully apparent at day time. These parents often go to the Hospital Emergency Departments and have to wait hours before being seen. Most of these cases are best suited to a GP consultation rather than a Hospital Emergency Room, but in the middle of the night there is no where else to go for families who cannot afford an up-front fee.

After hours services are particularly tough to come by in Canberra. The few large private GP practices tend to be in very central locations and shut their doors no later than 10pm. Most small practices operate hours that correspond to normal business hours, many do not bulk bill and many do not take new patients who walk in without an appointment.

The Medicare system was intended to support GP services for those who cannot afford private health care. Unfortunately most of Canberra's GP clinics shut shop at the end of the office day. In effect this means that access to a major component of our public health system ends when the sun goes down. But Canberrans do not choose when they fall sick. The Canberra Liberals believe that there is a role for public provision of GP services after dark. We will act to correct the current market failure which Labor has allowed to develop.

The word on the ground is that there is a real gap in services. But Mr Stanhope has not been listening or responding to the unmet demand.

“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'm sick of trying to get in to see a doctor, they're too far away and they won't bulk bill. I don't want to wait in the line at Calvary so I ring the ambulance and get taken to Calvary.” **North West Belconnen resident**
(Feasibility Study, West Belconnen Community Health and Wellbeing Centre, 2006)

The Liberal Plan

For After Hours GP Services

A Canberra Liberal government will commit \$19.8 million towards the operating costs for three new After-Hours GP Clinics, and \$5.9 million to purchase medical equipment and to fund the fitout of leased premises.

The locations for the three new centres have been chosen on the basis of greatest distance from Canberra's hospitals and based on the shortage of regular GP services in these three geographic areas.

The hours of operation for our public GP Centres will be based around filling the market gap when private GP services do not operate. The Canberra Liberals recognise that Local General Practitioner care is appropriate for meeting most health needs and it provides an important referral service. Medical centres help take pressure off hospital emergency departments and allow most patients to receive care more quickly than is possible at hospital.

The three GP Centres will deliver services across extended hours.

- The largest of the three centres will be based in South Tuggeranong. This centre will operate from 6pm to 6am, seven days a week. This centre will be staffed by up to two GPs and two nurse practitioners at peak times.
- The two smaller centres at West Belconnen and Gungahlin will operate from 6pm to 2am, seven days a week. Each of these centres will be staffed by one GP and one nurse practitioner at any time.
- There will be no out-of-pocket fee at the centres, so access is not limited according to those who can afford the service. Priority will be determined by nurses and doctors, based on clinical need.
- All centres will be supported by security staff. All centres will include secure entry areas adjacent to reception to protect receptionists and patients. Car parks and access points around the centres will also be fitted with security lighting and CCTV cameras.
- The centres will include some short term observation beds, for cases where the medical staff need to directly observe and monitor a patient before final treatment or referral. These beds will also ensure a capacity to provide emergency triage services at several locations across Canberra in the event of a major disaster or emergency.

By using nurses in combination with doctors, we will be able to assign patients with less serious illnesses to a nurse and bring down the costs of the service. Nurse practitioners are very senior nurses who are trained and qualified to undertake assessment, prescribe some medications and refer clients to other health professionals. Where necessary a doctor can review decisions by a nurse and sign-off on referrals for specialist treatment and prescriptions.

The premises for all three facilities will be leased, so that services can commence in the second half of 2009. The service will be government owned and operated.

A tender will be let in early 2009 to find suitable locations. The preference will be to collocate the service with existing Health centres, in a “hot-desked” arrangement. For instance a private or community-run health service may operate on the premises by day time, while the government service takes over after-hours. This arrangement will allow for a number of synergies – including through savings in property costs.

Preference will also be given to bids that include proposals for location adjoining or in close vicinity to a late hours pharmacy.

- A shared facility in Tuggeranong would enable a full 24 hour service to operate from a single premises.
- As population growth continues in Gungahlin, the objective will be to upgrade the after-hours operation of that facility, so that it can also become part of a 24 hour facility in the long term.

There will be community consultation on potential locations and this information will be taken into account in making a final decision on the locations for the three centres.

Meeting the Needs of a Growing Gungahlin Community

Stanhope Labor has promised to build a “Health Centre” for Gungahlin. The 2008 budget includes money to construct the centre, but includes no money to staff or operate the facility! Moreover Health Minister Katy Gallagher has admitted that this centre will have no GP services, telling a parliamentary committee that “there will be no GPs located in that centre” (Hansard 14 August 2008).

There is a clear contrast between the Labor and Liberal commitment to Gungahlin. Labor refuse to allow GPs at a health centre. And they have only budgeted for bricks and mortar, not for coal-face services. The Canberra Liberals will commence an after-hours GP service for Gungahlin in 2009 in leased premises. Our policy starts within one year, not in three years’ time. Our policy allows for services in Gungahlin to grow as Gungahlin grows. Labor has a cosmetic fix for the election, we have a real targeted and long-term solution to the needs of a growing community.

Redressing the Scarcity of Services in West Belconnen

West Belconnen has been selected for a third health centre because of the acute shortage of GPs in the area and the pressure which residents from the area add to Calvary Hospital’s Emergency Department.

Canberra as a whole has around one GP for every 849 people. By comparison the West Belconnen area has around 10 GPs (full time and part time) for a community of 32,744. This represents a ratio of 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.

Moreover the West Belconnen area (postcode 2615) is the most disadvantaged in the ACT based on 2006 census data.

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 appreciably in recent years (from 5,398 hospital visits in 2000-01 to 6,858 visits in 2003-04). Average waiting times at Calvary increased by a third over this period.

A priority on coming to government will be to open West Belconnen Health Centre Co-operative. The Canberra Liberals have already committed to provide a total \$400,000 of one-off government support in addition to \$283,000 of business and community commitments, to ensure that the centre can commence operation without further delay. Locals in West Belconnen have struggled for three and a half years to obtain improved health services without sufficient support from the Stanhope Government to help get a new clinic off the ground.

Our objective would be to “hot-desk” our after-hours ACT Government practice for West Belconnen at the same facility as the West Belconnen Health Centre to relieve after-hours pressure on Calvary’s Emergency Department. A night time government practice at the same location would improve the financial performance of the Health Co-Operative and raise its profile within the community.

Attractive Remuneration Packages

The doctors and nurse practitioners at the GP Clinics will be remunerated at very competitive night shift rates, to ensure that the positions will be attractive and the Centres will be adequately staffed at all times.

Private medical walk-in centres in Canberra have not been prepared to pay GPs the necessarily high remuneration required to deliver all night access to General Practitioner services. Night time GP services are difficult to run at a profit, whether operated on a bulk billing model or on a private billing basis. The private practices are the backbone of the GP market, but they cannot be expected to deliver a service on a basis where their operations become unprofitable.

The Canberra Liberals recognise that in the Canberra market the ACT Government needs to bridge the funding gap in order to make all night GP Centres a reality. A Canberra Liberal Government will assume the responsibility for addressing the unmet needs of the Canberra community by providing the necessary funding to deliver a high quality service in a safe and secure environment.

Financing Requirement

The Canberra Liberals will provide \$19.8 million over three years to support the operation of the three GP clinics as not-for-profit operations. We will also provide a further \$5.9 million towards capital costs of fitting out the centres, including the costs of medical equipment, CCTV, security lighting and the cost of secure entry points.

	2008/09 \$000	2009/10 \$000	2010/11 \$000	2011/12 \$000
Three GP Clinics – Recurrent cost	0	5,946	6,812	7,084
Three GP Clinics – Capital cost	5,892	0	0	0

Attracting GPs

Tackling Canberra's GP Shortfall

The ACT Division of General Practice boasts a membership of 380 GPs and 135 general practices in the ACT and surrounding region. Many of these GPs are part-time and in full-time equivalent terms the number is closer to 220.

These numbers would suggest that there ought on average to be one general practice for each suburb in Canberra. But unfortunately the dispersion of GP services is patchy in parts of our city. Several outer-lying areas of our city are relatively underserved.

- West Belconnen is especially under-served and compares poorly even to some regional areas in Australia.
- Gungahlin as a relatively new suburban area has been underserved.
- The southern end of Tuggeranong is underserved.

Statistics from the Commonwealth Department of Health show that the ACT has fewer GPs per head of population than in all of the six states. The latest official data published by the Productivity Commission in the 2008 *Report on Government Services* shows that Canberra has just 66.8 GPs per 100,000 people, well below the national average of 86.1.

The Stanhope Government has admitted that Canberra faces a shortage of around 60 GPs. Yet this same Government has done nothing to entice GPs to come to Canberra or to encourage older GPs to remain in the workforce. The Stanhope Government has funded some advertising but has put no incentives on the table for doctors to attract from interstate.

Small business owners at the Calwell shopping centre have spent close to \$20,000 of their own money on advertising for a doctor to fill their empty medical centre, to no avail. The Stanhope Government is leaving it up to the private sector to find the GPs which the community needs and is making no substantial contribution to solving our GP shortage.

Canberra's GP profession is ageing with a number of practitioners approaching retirement. Unless new doctors are attracted to Canberra, the GP shortage in our city will only get worse.

A number of older doctors feel squeezed out of their profession because of a range of pressures. One of the worst pressures is the gruelling hours that GPs feel they have to work to meet the health needs and the expectations of their patients. We believe that an after-hours government service in key locations of need can help private GPs maintain a better work-life balance.

We believe that the attractive remuneration provided at the three new after-hours GP Centres will ensure these after-hours operations are well staffed. But we also

recognise a broader need to attract a greater number of GPs into private practices to meet the needs of the Canberra public.

To this end, a Canberra Liberal Government will establish an incentive fund to provide up to 60 grants of \$75,000 each to attract GPs from interstate to relocate to Canberra. These grants will be made available in 2008-09 to attract new doctors at the earliest opportunity. The “GPs for Canberra” grants will remain available for up to four years or until the amount provided to the fund has been acquitted.

The ACT Scheme will be targeted to experienced GPs, with an objective of meeting relocation costs and providing a further financial enticement to come to the ACT. The grants will be very competitive with other incentive schemes for GPs. For instance the Australian Government’s HECS Reimbursement Scheme for medical graduates only provides for an initial reimbursement of one fifth of a participant’s HECS debt. The Rural Medical Bonded Scholarship program provides for a payment of \$22,222 in 2008. The ACT Scheme will be very competitive.

The grants will be subject to several conditions.

- The grants will be available to GPs who have been delivering GP services interstate in the year prior to applying for the grant.
- GPs receiving the grants must enter a commitment to work at least three years on a full-time equivalent basis in the Australian Capital Territory providing GP services, whether as a full or part owner of their own practice, or as a salaried GP in a large practice, or as a GP at the new after-hours GP Clinics.
- The grants will be payable up-front, but if a doctor does not serve out the full term of the agreement, there will be a contractual obligation to reimburse to the fund a portion of the grant equivalent to the service not rendered.
- The grants may only be used for practice in areas of demonstrated need, for instance to establish a new practice in a suburb that has no GP or to buy into an existing practice which needs more staff to meet demand.

A Canberra Liberal Government will inject \$4.5 million into the fund in 2008-09.

	2008/09 \$000	2009/10 \$000	2010/11 \$000	2011/12 \$000
GPs for Canberra Fund	4,500	0	0	0

Incentive schemes such as this have been proven to work. The Federal Government’s incentive programs to attract rural doctors made a strong difference. For instance much more moderate incentives to doctor graduates produced a 4.3% increase in rural and remote doctors across Australia in the 2000-2001 year, while at the same time there was a 0.8% decline in metropolitan areas.

Keeping ACT Medical Graduates in Canberra

The Stanhope Government has been prepared to sign a deal with the New South Wales government that resulted in the loss this year of 14 graduate medical students who have studied at the Australian National University in Canberra. In late July 2008 these graduates were told that they had failed to gain internships at Canberra Hospital.

The Stanhope Government initially made no effort to find places for these graduate doctors places in the ACT health system or to encourage and assist their entry into private practice. The allocation of intern places at Canberra Hospital is not done by the ACT Government but rather has been farmed out to the NSW Institute of Medical Education and Training.

The allocation of places is done by a computer, is based on the top three preferences of students and lumps ANU students in with students from across New South Wales.

The Stanhope Government has lost sight of the purpose for training students in the ACT. Three years ago the former Health Minister Simon Corbell told the Legislative Assembly that the purpose of a local medical school was to retain graduates in Canberra.

“That will mean that we will be able to address some of the significant shortages we now face concerning general practitioners, medical specialists and clinicians in the primary and acute care areas of our health system. We know that doctors are more likely to stay where they train.” (Hansard 14 December 2005)

A Canberra Liberal Government will guarantee internship places in the ACT hospital system for all ANU Medical School graduates who want one.

It is a gross misallocation of resources to lose such a sizable number of young doctors from the ACT after so much has been spent training them. The Canberra Liberals regard these young doctors as our number one priority for purposes of meeting our GP workforce shortage.

- These graduate doctors have a whole working career ahead of them and they therefore offer a greater long-term benefit to the ACT than mid-career doctors who migrate from interstate or overseas.
- These young doctors have already experienced the benefits of life in Canberra and will often have friends, families and partners based here. Many of them would prefer to start their career locally rather than be forced interstate and it will therefore be generally easier to recruit these doctors than to woo interstate doctors.

Helping Young GPs into Private Practice

Recently qualified doctors are not given any significant encouragement by the Stanhope Government to enter private practice. The establishment costs for a very basic medical centre can be very substantial. This is quite a daunting hurdle to entry for a young professional who may also be confronted with a large HECS debt, a first mortgage and the costs of starting a young family.

The Canberra Liberals recognise the tremendous benefit for public health care if we can attract a new generation to establish or join private medical practices. If we can encourage a new wave of GPs to enter the market then Canberrans will enjoy more localised access to GP services throughout Canberra's suburbs, they will experience shorten waiting times for GP consultations and GPs will have the benefit of improved work-life balance.

We believe in encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit among young doctors and consider that by facilitating the set-up of their private practices we can help strengthen the ACT health system over the long term.

The Canberra Liberals will establish a Young GP Entrepreneurs Fund to provide low interest loans to young GPs who have received their medical training in the ACT or undertaken an internship here and who wish to establish a medical practice within the borders of the ACT or to buy into a partnership.

The grants may only be used for practices in areas of demonstrated need, for instance to establish a new practice in a suburb that has no GP or to buy into an existing practice which needs more staff to meet demand.

- Eligible GPs will need to demonstrate that they have developed robust business plans for their ventures when making an application for a loan.
- The loans will be repayable on terms over eight to fifteen years at the cost of capital to the ACT Government. This will provide a saving to doctors of thousands of dollars compared to the cost of commercial loans. The ACT Government will apply less stringent security requirements compared to those that are sought by the banks.
- The loans may be used for purposes such as fit-out of a clinic, purchase of medical equipment and supplies, relevant IT software and equipment, office furniture, purchase of commercial premises and up to six months working capital for approved purposes such as lease payments.
- The loans may also be used towards purchasing a share in an existing practice, provided there is an independent appraisal verifying the value of the practice.
- Young doctors establishing a sole practitioner business will be eligible for loans up to the sum of \$150,000, while doctors who are buying a share in a multi-doctor practice will be eligible for loans up to the value of \$100,000. Young doctors eligible for grants may propose to establish a multi-doctor practice

- together and will each be eligible for \$100,000 grants.
- If a doctor who has been issued a loan sells their practice or ceases to provide GP services within Canberra through their practice, then the balance of their loan will be repayable at commercial rates.

This assistance may not cover all the costs for entering a private practice, but it will substantially reduce the barrier to entering the profession and give young GPs access to finance on very affordable terms.

A Canberra Liberal Government will capitalise the scheme with a provision for 15 grants in 2009 and a further 10 grants in 2010. In 2010 we will review Canberra's GP workforce needs and the career forecasts for graduate doctors who have been trained in the ACT, in order to determine any further needs for capital injections in the fund.

We will support this initiative with an initial capital injection of \$3.75 million, and maintain the fund as a rolling fund. We will also commit \$250,000 to establishing the fund administration arrangements and reviewing the future capital needs of the fund.

	2008/09 \$000	2009/10 \$000	2010/11 \$000	2011/12 \$000
Young GP Entrepreneurs Fund - Capital	2,250	1,500	0	0
Young GP Entrepreneurs Fund Administration – Recurrent	90	60	100	0



Health Funding

This policy is but one component of a comprehensive rollout of Canberra Liberal policies for future improvements to the ACT health system.

The Canberra Liberals are pleased with and supportive of the inclusion of significant new funding for the health portfolio in the 2008-09 budget. We are strongly supportive of the significant investment in a Women's and Children's facility at Canberra Hospital.

There are differences between Stanhope Labor and the Canberra Liberals on health. The Canberra Liberals have a clear seven point action plan to address the problems that Labor continues to ignore. The challenge is now on Labor to match our solutions and to match our commitment of new funding where it is needed.

The services at the three GP clinics will be bulk billed to the ACT Government, but a Canberra Liberal Government will seek to enter an arrangement with the Commonwealth for after-hours rebates under the Medicare Benefits Schedule. The funding committed under this policy package assumes no Commonwealth subsidy at this point, therefore any future Commonwealth decision to approve funding would reduce the total operating cost of the centres. The bottom line to Canberrans who need GP services after dark is that there will be no out-of-pocket expense from attendance at the new GP Clinics.