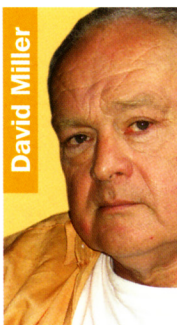


Country doctors draw a line in the sand

LIGHT AIRS



David Miller

BEFORE CHRISTMAS LAST year while visiting Sydney, an e-invitation arrived to join a protest about NSW State Government health policy in the bush.

At Bondi Beach, organised by the Rural Doctors Association, dozens of members from country practices were forming a line in the sand.

'A line in the sand' is a strong metaphor. It means 'you have already gone too far. If you go any further, there is no turning back.'

This was too good to miss.

By the time I struggled thorough city traffic and reached Bondi, I could see in the distance the phalanx of brave doctor warriors on the sand. But as I didn't have enough change to appease the parking monster, the line was breaking up before the rising tide by the time I hit the beach.

Since that day, the Far West health service has run out of money, to the extent that a public hospital had to borrow supplies from the local vet.

Most recently, the GP/obstetricians at Murwillumbah resigned en masse at manipulations aimed at downgrading the maternity service. GP/Obstetricians are a rare breed, impossible to replace.

The ultimatum seems to

not have been heeded and the response from NSW Health is as indifferent as the tide which washed away the footprints from the sand.

It is as though those in power don't really care.

It might be tempting to think, 'oh, these are just quaint sheep farming folk. Their problems are something separate from the city,' a conclusion which would be spot-off really. If NSW politicians really do manage to get away with such medical neglect in the bush, then they might be encouraged to bring similar penny-pinching measures to town. So it's in everybody's interest to listen to the country cousins, and stand shoulder to shoulder with the doctors.

What are the issues then?

Actually there's quite a lot going on. It's not just about toilet miscarriages in emergency departments. That's just a symptom of a deeper ill, a smokescreen even. It is more to do with cutting corners at the expense of public hospital health and includes the culling of essential staff. The issues are so deep they affect city dwellers too. For instance, closer to town, Manly Hospital emergency department is due for closure. To most Sydneysiders, that's almost a bit overseas, but really, it's within the sound of cannonfire from Pinchgut. This means, that if there were no hospital there, then a Manly person with a medical problem would have to catch the ferry to the city, or back-pedal all the way to Mona Vale, to a hospital with problems of its own.

In the bush, out of sight of the city, things are much, much worse. Distances travelled to have a baby safely in hospital are in some parts, just impossible. For instance, there is a town called Pambula, on the South Coast, with an obstetric service which is run by local GPs. It has been very

functional. It's not the doctors, the midwives or the local people who want this unit closed. It's the NSW Government. In an act of political vandalism, health department bureaucrats billing themselves the 'Maternity Services Committee' have created a report recommending closure.

All over the state, the very nature of emergency departments is under serious challenge, in both city and country. Emergency medical specialists have made scathing comments about plans, which envisage parallel systems of care, in which specialists will see serious cases which need to be seen within half an hour (triage 1-3), and GPs based within the hospital will see the less serious 'fours n fives' at a less determinate time in the future. This is a part of the new protocols.

On face, this could sound like a reasonable plan, but according to one senior emergency doctor, "Triage categories are a measure of acuity but not complexity. There's no evidence whatsoever that redirecting GP style patients will reduce the workload for emergency departments."

In the words of that well-known Australian battler Michael Caton from *The Castle*, "Tell 'em they're dreamin'."

With mounting evidence of waste and incompetence, we can only await the day when Captain Krudd of the good ship Canberra sails in, as promised at the election, to rescue survivors from the rocks of mismanagement, should our ship of state ever become a leaky scow. It would be nice if he could blow the Macquarie Street buccaneers out of the water, and maybe save some of the health treasure before it is all buried. Then all Australians would have a chance at equal access to health services.

But as long as both ships belong to the same line, the Canberra's guns may be slow to roar in anger.

