

# Mullumbimby Hospital says 'Goodnight Doctor'

Light Arts David Miller



NESTLED IN THE DEEP north of the Byron shire is the old Mullumbimby hospital. Built in the 1960s it has the style of the time, a long corridor with the patients' rooms looking out onto a nice sub-tropical garden. It had an operating theatre, a labour ward and a nursery. GPs ran everything, including the after hours roster. It was like that when I arrived in 1975. Unknown at that time, it had a major flaw, a true time bomb in the ceiling. Asbestos.

When I started work in this snug hospital, night followed day as far as duty was concerned. Every practising doctor was expected to catch babies and work in the emergency department as part of country practice.

Now it's in the news. *The Echo*, our local paper is buzzing with news that the longstanding tradition of duty night doctor is to be replaced by a video link to a doctor at Tweed Heads hospital.

According to some editorial letters, many people think that doctors working at night is still the deal. Indeed, some of the senior long-serving doctors still gave battered vestiges of loyalty, but Dr Rosie Hamilton, a part-time GP, wrote in to clarify the more contemporary situation, saying 'to me, moving to this area to live and work, in no way obliges me to work after hours in emergency.'

The strange thing is that there is no shortage of locum doctors

willing to do night call because the hourly pay is generous. The problem for the bean counters is lack of patients, averaging two per night - a waste of money.

I have worked this shift and often just slept through. Of course, life threatening emergencies do come in, that's for sure, and having a doctor present helps the patient, their relatives, the nurses and the ambulance.

Considering the under-utilisation of the after hours service, it's surprising how much this move has worried the community. One local woman who did turn up with a moth flapping in her ear wrote to *The Echo*, glowing with praise for the service. She was seen by 'a handsome young doctor in blue jeans sporting designer stubble. I fell in love with the doctor and the medical service.' Is this over-servicing, or a standard the public have come to expect of the night doctor?

Certainly a hard act to follow for the unblinking eye, but the lady affirmed the fears of many I'm sure. 'I would have to explain to a camera lens my distress, my fear, my terror.'

But wait a minute. How will this Big Brother doctor eye operate?

Does the patient front up to emergency and press the eagle button like the police station at Brunswick heads and wait for lens fixation. That's how it sounds and maybe it's a pity that some thought for public educa-

tion was not rolled out with the program.

One really good thing, there is always a nurse on duty. I can say that the Mullumbimby nurses are well trained and helpful and supposedly would do most of the talking with the distant doctor in camera.

Some staff members say that this new measure is a way to close the hospital.

Mullumbimby, like many other small hospitals, is often under threat of closure. It seems that any excuse will do but public outrage does provide something of a handbrake and it's not the first setback for this country hospital.

When the curtain went down on theatre in the late '80s, it was a great loss because Caesarians and epidurals were no longer available. Local doctors could no longer offer the convenience of minor surgery. Skills atrophied. It was a sad fate but just a symptom of changing times.

There was one positive outcome. In the absence of facilities, birth had to become natural or stop. Midwives, doctors and women all adapted, even with the inclusion of water as a birthing tool.

When the plaster started falling off the ceiling around the nurses' desk about 15 years ago, the hospital had to be closed for asbestos containment and it was given a shelf life of a few years, now long passed. Emergency services were moved into temporary accommodation in the CWA building. Significantly then, night services were suspended for the first time and everyone managed.

Now the community is waiting for the long ago made promise by successive governments for a new hospital at Ewingsdale.

Some people are cynical enough to say that this new cutback is a ploy to close Mullumbimby hospital altogether. After all, it's not too far to Byron Bay and only a quick drive to Tweed Heads.

Mullumbimby Hospital? Hmm. Nice piece of land.

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