

EMBARGO: 3.00 P.M.

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
AT THE OPENING OF THE MAROONDAH SOCIAL HEALTH CENTRE, RINGWOOD,  
MELBOURNE, SUNDAY 1 SEPTEMBER 1974

---

One of the greatest areas of inequality which exists in Australia is in the field of health care. Too many areas lack adequate hospitals and too many people don't have ready access to the services of doctors and other skilled medical workers.

The provision of medical services has simply not kept pace with the changes in our society. This applies particularly in our cities. Hospitals, doctors and other services are spread unevenly and unfairly. They tend to be clustered in long-established and generally affluent areas. In contrast, people in newer and frequently disadvantaged areas have not had proper access to the amount of high-quality care on which all Australians should be able to depend.

It is quite wrong that people in some areas of our cities should only have to travel a few miles to receive treatment at a major hospital, while other people in the same metropolis are faced with journeys of 20 miles or more to get this treatment. It is equally wrong that people in some areas should have available a more than sufficient number of doctors to provide medical treatment while people in other areas suffer a shortage of doctors.

It has been clear for some years that not enough would be done to overcome these inequalities until the Australian Government, the national government, assumed a greater responsibility for the provision of hospital and medical services throughout the nation.

It is for this reason that the present Government last year initiated an urgent and thorough examination of the nation's health services. A Hospitals and Health Services Interim Committee, which later became by statute the Hospitals and Health Services Commission, was appointed to investigate, report on, and recommend necessary action to overcome both immediate and long-term problems. The objective of the Commission is:

"The provision of high-quality, readily accessible, reasonably comprehensive, co-ordinated and efficient health and related welfare services at local, regional, State and national levels."

Acting on the recommendations of the Commission the Government has already started moving towards the satisfaction of this objective. In the last financial year, for example, we allocated \$4.5 million to meet urgent needs for additional hospitals in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Perhaps the most exciting initiatives have been taken in the field of community health services. In 1973 the Government adopted as a statement of policy and principle the recommendations contained in the report entitled "A Community Health Program for Australia", prepared by the Hospitals and Health Services Interim Committee. In addition to the community health program based on that report, it introduced the Mental Health and Related Services Assistance Act last year to provide the basis for its separate, but closely associated, community mental health, alcoholism and drug dependency program. Both programs were introduced by the Government to foster the development of a high standard of community-based health care services. They were in accordance with the Government's announced health policy of providing regionally organised, community-based services with greater emphasis on health education, prevention and rehabilitation, and as a real alternative to hospital and other high-cost health resources.

A total of \$17.5 million was allocated under these programs in 1973/74. This consisted of \$10 million under the community health program and \$7.5 million under the community mental health, alcoholism and drug dependency program. A further \$7.5 million is available under the latter program in 1974/75, after which it will be encompassed in the more broadly based community health program. The majority of projects approved under both programs in 1973/74 will be operated by State health authorities. However, a significant number of volunteer and community organisations have also received Australian Government financial assistance.

The Maroondah Social Health Centre is a good example of a community-based service which has received the Government's assistance. The centre had its origins in the St. Stephen's (Methodist-Presbyterian) Social Health Board and was formed as a voluntary benevolent organisation at a public meeting at Ringwood on 5 November 1973. Its aim is to help overcome the deficiency in services dealing with emotional and psychiatric problems in this area of suburban Melbourne. The Australian Government first became involved in assisting the project in April when the Minister for Health, Dr. Everingham, approved a grant of \$10,500 to cover salaries and wages at the centre until the end of the 1973/74 financial year. A further grant of \$9,000 was approved in July for the first quarter of the new financial year.

Since that allocation was made the Government has been considering further assistance. In its deliberations it has benefited from the representations made by the member for the federal electorate of Casey, Mr. Race Mathews, on behalf of the Centre. As a result I am able to announce that the Government has allocated \$27,908 towards the project for the last three quarters of 1974/75. This includes \$23,640 for salaries and \$1,462 for the rent of the premises from which the service operates.

This assistance forms part of an integrated network of community services being developed by the Government in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. In the last month the Minister for Health has approved another substantial allocation to help in the development of these services. He approved the allocation of \$600,000 to the Victorian Hospitals and Charities Commission to buy a private hospital in Ringwood which is being converted to a day hospital, rehabilitation centre and short-term hostel for physically handicapped people - the first such facility to be provided in the eastern suburbs.

I believe that an important lesson can be drawn from these allocations. They demonstrate the Government's continuing commitment to major reform in the provision of health and other services. In view of the current economic difficulties facing Australia, some people may have begun to doubt that continuing commitment. They may have begun to think that inflation and related economic problems would cripple our program of reform. Some may have begun to think that the effect of our current economic problems might be to prevent the present Government from making any significant difference to our society.

I want to affirm now that our program of reform will continue. I want to affirm now that we will continue to work towards the eradication of the kind of inequalities that I have described in relation to health services. If anyone doubts that a sufficiently determined Government can make a difference in these areas, they should ask the people of Deer Park in Melbourne of the benefits they have received from their new community health centre. If anyone doubts the difference that can be made, they should ask the people of Caulfield of the extra services that have been made possible by our assistance to the Caulfield Community Care Centre. Equally they could check on the benefits that have flowed from the establishment of health centres at Ingle Farm and Clovelly Park in Adelaide. They could also seek the opinion of the thousands of people who are receiving new ancillary health services in the Illawarra region south of Sydney or in the western metropolitan region of Sydney itself.

The Government has demonstrated that it can make a difference in the provision of health services in these and many other areas. Despite any economic problems we might face, we will continue to demonstrate that difference. Our commitment to reform does not, of course, apply only to health services. We have already transformed the funding of education at all levels. That transformation will continue. We have already begun in Albury/Wodonga the first major program of decentralisation in this country. That program will continue. We have already begun to inject large sums of national finance into our ailing urban transport system. That injection will continue. In the last fortnight we have announced the provision of \$56 million to councils to help reduce inequalities between local government regions. That drive against inequality will continue. And we have made it quite clear that we will go ahead with the greatly expanded program for the care and education of pre-school children.

The present Government believes that major reforms cannot be achieved in any of these areas without its involvement, without national involvement. The States by themselves simply don't have the funds to bring about the changes that are needed. The national Government does have these funds and any current economic problems will not prevent it from bringing about improvements in essential services. Our dedication remains to the creation of the best community services that the country can afford.

There are those who are quick to criticise government spending. There are those who would argue that at a time of economic difficulty we should cut back on all our programs. Nothing could be more short sighted. Indeed, if we accept that wage and salary increases are part of the inflationary problem, we should see these programs as helping to counter that problem.

For, if we can provide a range of community services to satisfy the reasonable needs of all citizens and to create reasonable opportunities for all citizens, we will have taken a step towards reducing what might be termed the incomes mentality that is so prevalent in our society. Our aim here is to enable people not to have to look to their individual earning power to satisfy so many of their basic needs.

The meeting of these needs by providing adequate services must depend on Government action. An increased wage alone is not going to ensure that a worker's children will receive a proper education. An increased wage will not guarantee access by that worker's family to high-quality medical and hospital care at a reasonable cost. An increased wage will not grant him adequate transport, roads, child care facilities, recreation outlets and the like. In turn, if that worker can look to the Government to provide these facilities and services, he will not be so dependent on seeking ever-increasing wages.

Thus, our program of reform can fulfil two purposes. It can help reduce inequality in our society. At the same time it can help produce economic stability. The current economic climate will not stop the Government from pursuing and achieving these twin goals.