

RESPONSE FROM SHANE RATTENBURY MLA

ACT COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH CARE ELECTION FORUM: QUESTIONS RECEIVED PRIOR AND DURING THAT WERE NOT ASKED DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS

- 1) What plan do the panel members have to improve digital health access? As our system becomes increasingly reliant on e-prescriptions, telehealth and booking appointments online, what about consumers who don't have the technology, adequate internet access, skills or time to learn those skills? We know these patients are also the most likely to have the worst healthcare outcomes and most reduced access to face-to-face services. How will you improve digital health access for those in need?**

The Greens are pleased to see the increase in access to telehealth and are committed to ensure this technology can be expanded across all healthcare needs. We know that access to technology isn't available to everyone, and recognise there are barriers to access for particular groups, for example elderly, CALD, disabled and those from lower socio-economic groups, who would not access healthcare via telehealth. We want to see the opportunities for telehealth grow amongst individuals within these groups, but also ensure there is a patient-centred approach in delivering this primary care, so preference and choice is prioritised. It is important that telehealth not be used to replace the traditional modes of healthcare, but to instead provide additional options for healthcare accessibility.

When COVID-19 first kicked off the ACT Government provided stimulus responses to a few community organisations to facilitate the purchasing of IT equipment and resources to provide to members and participants, to ensure continuation of engagement in services vital to keeping them well and active in the community. The Greens know that access to technology will be critical in delivering telehealth more broadly across the community, and know that it presents a real opportunity to provide healthcare, more regularly, to harder to reach groups, but also more efficiently for those who may not prioritise healthcare in their busy lives.

This will be an important area to monitor to understand what the community needs, and ways to expand healthcare.

- 2) I am a local Canberra GP. The panel has spoken about GPs and their central role in primary care and improving access and integration. You've also mentioned a number of plans that involve GP involvement. But as GPs are generally quite busy caring for their patients & trying to stay afloat during COVID with increased precautions but reduced foot traffic - what are your plans to engage more closely with GPs to ensure that these plans will be effectively implemented?**

The Greens know GPs are the frontline and coalface of healthcare and hold important and critical information on healthcare needs in our community. The health system relies on GPs to be the central point of contact for many healthcare needs, and to provide referrals to the next step of care for a patient journey. We hear time and time again that the system is siloed and patients don't know where to seek the support they need. We know GPs play the role of providing avenues for some services like specialists, specific tests and screening and so forth. However, there is growing demand and necessity for community-health services, like physical activity, skills-based health programs, mental health community support, and GPs are recognised as being a valuable resource to utilise in order to improve the flow and integration of access to the spectrum of health services available.

The Greens recognise this as an area for improvement, particularly with Shane Rattenbury having the mental health portfolio, and believe there is a significant opportunity to learn from GPs regarding how they envisage better integration could work, but also provide the opportunity to collaborate with the broader health system to create efficiencies and improvements.

The Greens are committed to ongoing and effective engagement with GPs, drawing on their insights from being at the coalface of health care. We would do this by linking with the Royal College of General Practitioners, the AMA, and other representative groups. We would also establish specialist working groups where particular issues warrant a dedicated focus.

- 3. The involvement by pharmacists in the recent emergencies (Victorian Asthma emergency, bushfires, COVID 19 pandemic) has shown the value to patient care of the important and key role they bring to these types of situations through not only their accessibility and availability but also, importantly, their unique and diverse skills.**

Currently, their roles both formal and informal in disaster preparedness and management are largely undefined or acknowledged by government despite significant research having been undertaken in this area which identified 43 pharmacist-related roles within the international disaster community dependent upon individual jurisdictional considerations across the preventive, preparedness, responsiveness and recovery phases.

Do you see pharmacists being used more widely to maximise their potential contribution in disaster and emergency situations and, how do you see their skills being recognised and used?

The Greens respect the expansive and varied skills pharmacists have and there is a developing dialogue on how they can be utilised to fill healthcare gaps and needs, and provide additional services.

The Greens welcome research on how to best utilise pharmacists/pharmacy particularly in times of crisis, and believe there is potential to explore how this would look in practice in the ACT.

The Greens recognise the expanding role of pharmacists with the uptake mental health first aid training and have received advice that has been incredibly beneficial in responding and providing service to those who attend pharmacies and need support in this area. This is just one example of how pharmacists can maximise their potential and provide additional service outside of the traditional realms of pharmacy. We very much welcome these developments.

The recent crises are good examples to demonstrate the agility and responsiveness of pharmacists to provide the care, advice and support people need in challenging times. Pharmacists have a diverse range of skills and knowledge and are often on the coalface responding to the health and wellbeing needs of the community.

4. When it comes to preventative health for both cardiometabolic health as well as mental health, exercise and physical activity can play a huge role. Do you have any plans to increase access to this in through the health system

The Greens believe that prevention is a critical area for health investment and simple activity and movement can be extremely beneficial in preventing many health harms and concerns.

We strongly believe that schools, institutions, community groups and so forth should have resources available that facilitate access to exercise and physical activity for their participants. This includes advocacy services, promotion and education.

The Greens are committed to providing greater resources to ensure people from all demographics can be engaged or accessed in some way to promote healthy behaviours, like exercise and physical activity. Access to such services physical activities should not be

determined by wealth and it's important for Governments or organisations to make opportunities for physical activity available. It should also be determined on best-practice and evidence-based. There seems to be an emerging need for primary health practitioners to expand referrals for health into things like physical activity, education, and other skill building activities, and this is an area the Greens would like to be explored and expanded on over the next four years.

The Greens are also committed to the promotion and improvement of active travel throughout Canberra. We want to improve our cycling and walking network so Canberran's can be physically active as they commute. This is not only beneficial for health but the less we are using cars, the fewer emissions released that contribute to climate change impacts.

5. I would like to ask the forum what is the cost per patient seen at the Nurse-led walk-in clinics. Could this costing include the cost of running the facility as well as wages, insurance etc? Has any party thought of subsidising GP visits as the cost of GP visits goes through Medicare and therefore federal funding, as opposed to ACT Government funding?

The Greens are strong supporters of nurse-led walk-in centres (WIC), and for that reason the Weston, Dickson and Gungahlin WICs were a high priority for us in the 2016 Parliamentary Agreement with Labor. We understand that nurse-led walk-in centres provide an excellent alternative to the emergency department for minor ailments. They provide Canberrans the availability to present at extended and more convenient hours, without appointment and be seen within very short timeframes.

In the planning for Canberra's walk-in centres, significant analysis was undertaken in order to establish the best model for this type of healthcare. They have been extremely popular and well utilised, and the efficiency of the service has given Canberrans greater access to health treatment options.

The Greens perspective on the cost is this service makes healthcare available to many people who may not normally access a GP or other primary health care. For example, people without medicare cards, young people, those who cannot see a GP within business hours, or those who do not have a regular GP but need medical treatment urgently. One of the key benefits of seeking help at a nurse-led walk-in clinic is the advice that nurse practitioners can give on managing symptoms and navigating complex health systems while waiting to see a GP or specialist, or whether the person needs to go to the ED. Nurse-led walk-in clinics don't

replace GPs, they provide an additional service that fills gaps and provides help to people at risk of missing out on medical care when they really need it.

In relation to the cost, we understand that the public dollar amount quoted is \$150 per patient. There are of course economies-of-scale, whereby the more people that present means that the cost per patient visit reduces - and we are seeing the numbers growing continuously across all walk-in centres. We also know that presentations to EDs are more costly than treatment at a nurse-led walk-in centre, so as well as reducing wait times for other patients in the ED, this is another example of good investment.

6. Obesity is a significant issue in the ACT. The territory's Healthy Weight Initiative currently supports community access to childhood and adult obesity management programs, however, it does not address the growing obesity rates in adolescents. Will your Party commit to closing this gap by extending, and funding, obesity management programs for adolescents?

The Greens are committed to continued work on healthy weight programs and preventative healthcare generally, as well as in schools specifically. We know how important healthy weight programs are for our population, and it is important that these services are available to people of all age ranges, given that we know that obesity can contribute to a range of long-term chronic health impacts. To reduce the full impacts of the ever-growing health costs in our community - to government, and to people's lifestyles, we support the Government's [Healthy Canberra ACT Preventive Health Plan 2020-2025](#), as well as the actions in the now superseded, but nevertheless important [Towards Zero Growth Healthy Weight Action Plan](#). Both of these plans outline important actions to prevent or reduce obesity outcomes occurring in our children and young people.

7. This week two ACT Health related subjects were in the media:

- a) The massive backlog in access to various Specialist appointments - ranging from Paeds, Plastics, Urology, ENT, Orthopaedics, etc.**
- b) The opening of a fifth walk in clinic in Dickson.**

My question - there is a limited pool of funds for Public Health and clearly there are insufficient resources to adequately supply the tertiary health services ACT residents need.

Why is the ACT Government therefore insisting on pushing forward with the roll-out of more Nurse led walk-in Clinics? These clinics provide primary health care service to the community which is NOT traditionally the domain of State Governments. The anecdotal motivation that it is due to a lack of bulkbilling GPs and after-hours GPs is unproven and there are NO studies backing this up. The evidence also clearly shows that these clinics are much more expensive to the taxpayer than those provided by the General Practice community. Even the Chief Minister admits (as per this morning's ABC News) that the ACT has the wealthiest people in Australia on average so, even if the falsehood of a lack of access to bulkbilling GPs was true, the average Caberran could easily afford the \$40-50 out of pocket to see a private GP.

What they cannot afford is \$300+ out of pocket to see private Specialists or \$1000s to have private procedures - this is where our limited pool of Health Funding should be directed at.

I would also ask that the Minister does not deflect the current role of the Weston Creek Clinic as a red herring to deflect the question - The Covid issue is a unique situation and did not require an extremely expensive solution such as the walk - in clinics. If that was the case all of the WiCs would have been used for this role.

See our answer on nurse-led Walk in Centres above.

8. My questions relate to mental health so most relevant to the Minister for MH Shane Rattenbury.

What is being done to address the significant bed shortage for mental health patients in the ACT? I understand there has been a significant increase in MH presentations to ED during the pandemic & whilst many do not require admission, even those who do can often not get a bed. I have patients who regularly have to travel to Sydney or the south coast for inpatient care, this is only a viable option for those with private health care.

The Greens are highly aware that there has been significant pressure and demand on acute mental health services in the Territory for some time. For this reason we advocated strongly in the 2016 election for more attention to be paid to the mental health sector - to address the many gaps and overlaps and how the government could respond. Over the past Assembly term, we have worked hard to improve a range of government mental health services, as well

as working closely with the community sector on their programs and funding. You can read about some of this work [here](#).

Particularly during the COVID period, we have seen a significant sustained peak of very high acuity mental health presentations to emergency departments. I am pleased that I was able to respond to this increased demand by funding an additional 5 sub-acute mental health beds at Calvary.

We have also recently announced the refurbishment of ward 12B at The Canberra Hospital to create an additional 10 sub-acute mental health beds. I anticipate this project to be complete and operational by July 2021.

Along with a number of coordination measures taken to improve flow of patients, the additional bed-capacity will improve the admission of patients from ED to an in-patient setting.

The ACT has a number of facilities that offer specific mental health treatment, and at times other jurisdictions offer in-patient treatment more specific to an individual need. It is absolutely the expectation that when an individual is in need of acute in-patient mental health care, they should be able to seek support in the ACT, with community support available to provide a stepped-care approach for recovery.

The University of Canberra Adult Mental Health Rehabilitation Unit has 20 beds and was created to provide in-patient care to people who require more intensive rehabilitation in their recovery to facilitate progress to return to living as independently as possible in the community.

We also have the Southside Community Step-Up Step-Down facility opening by the end of 2020, which will provide people short-term intensive community support when they may be becoming unwell.

I am pleased that we were able to refurbish the Extended Care Unit at the Brian Hennessey Site, which is due for completion by the end of 2020. The unit provides medium term, residential care for people with complex and enduring mental illness, and helps patients to transition from more secure mental health settings into the community.

The ACT Government continues to monitor and analyse the bed-base need, and the type of in-patient care and treatment required in order to plan for the future of mental health

in-patient or out-patient needs. It's critical the ACT is planning for the future of mental health needs across acute and community needs.

What are you doing to support the Barwon/HealthCare development of a private MH unit in Canberra? Given the territory's bed shortage, it would seem an overdue resource for our community.

As Minister for Mental Health I have met with Barwon Health associates a number of times, and the private mental health hospital is welcomed by the ACT Government. The Deakin Clinic will be a mental health sub-acute and rehabilitation mental health hospital, with a day service and outpatient services. The ACT Health Directorate has also engaged with the clinic planning team to better understand how the facility will fit in with and complement existing services.

At this stage there are no plans to provide any direct government resources to the project as they have not been requested. The Government will continue to focus on boosting public health services and filling identified gaps either in acute, sub-acute and community care. We look forward to the facility opening - we will monitor its progress, and seek to maximise its integration with the existing mental health system in the ACT over the coming years.

Can you provide a timeframe for the completion/opening of the planned Adolescent MH unit? Again, I see my young people having to travel to Sydney or south coast for intensive care, this is unacceptable for our community & there has been talk of an adolescent unit for so long but no clear date for operations.

We do regret that some young people need to travel interstate for their mental health needs. Whilst the Canberra Hospital has two paediatric mental health beds, there is also a clear need for a specific adolescent mental health ward. This will be built as part of the Women's and Children's Centenary Hospital Expansion and is due to be operational in October 2022, with 6 adolescent beds and the availability of 2 flex beds at times of increased demand.

In the meantime, we are committed to expanding adolescent services through the Children and Youth Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and the Adolescent Mental Health Outreach Service.

What is being done to address the significant shortage of psychiatrists in the ACT - both in the public and private arena? I run a practice with 3 consultant psychiatrists but yet I still

have patients travelling to Sydney for treatment due to wait times. This is particularly pertinent for families with young people needing specialist care locally.

Since creating the portfolio for mental health in late 2016, I have been very focused on addressing the shortage of psychiatrists in the ACT. I believe that the shortage of psychiatrists is a national issue, and I raised it with my fellow mental health ministers at the COAG Health Forum. Psychiatrist shortages are a national and international issue and the ACT has a number of challenges in recruitment of psychiatrists based on area of expertise, desire for working in the public healthcare system, and general market forces, as well as the general attractiveness of Canberra as a place to live.

The recruitment of psychiatrists is an ongoing priority for the ACT Health Directorate and Canberra Health Services. Recruitment campaigns to attract new staff will be an ongoing endeavour, particularly as new programs and services become operational.

Further, the latest data from 2018 available on the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) states that the ACT as a jurisdiction has slightly above average FTE for psychiatrists. We recognise this does not address the demand and long wait times but does speak to a broader issue and provides a clearer perspective on psychiatrist availability.

Data can be found here -

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/mental-health-workforce/psychiatric-workforce>

Thank you for the opportunity to expand on our plans for health in the ACT.

You can keep up to date with our election initiatives here:

<https://greens.org.au/act/better-normal>.

[Our policy platform, including our detailed health policy, is here.](#)

If you have any further questions, our ACT Greens Spokesperson for Health is Shane Rattenbury.

You can contact him via email: rattenbury@act.gov.au or follow him on facebook <https://www.facebook.com/shanerattenburymla/>

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On behalf of the ACT Greens