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5 April 2011.

Dr. Alison Clegg,
Committee Secretary,
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing,
House of Representatives,
PO Box 6021,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600.

Dear Dr. Clegg,

The Group of Concerned Burra & District Residents in South Australia wishes to make a late submission to your inquiry into registration processes and support for overseas trained doctors. Members of our Group understand that the closing date for receipt of submissions was some weeks ago, but also understand that the final Public Hearing scheduled for Sydney, New South Wales has just taken place on Thursday the 31st of March 2011 and trust that you will accept this late submission as you will still most likely be in the process of receiving input on the terms of reference for your inquiry and are yet to review the input presented to you and commence deliberations.

Our Group found out about the inquiry only several weeks ago, when I heard the Committee Chair, Mr. Steve Georganas MP speaking about the inquiry on the radio. I don't recall seeing or hearing any other publicity in South Australia about the inquiry since the inquiry commenced and I understand that no Public Hearings have been scheduled or will be scheduled to be held in South Australia, although perhaps they still could be if sufficient demand is generated. Members of our Group would be happy to meet with Members of the Standing Committee to discuss our Submission if required, either in Burra or in Adelaide.

The Group of Concerned Burra & District Residents was formed in April 2010 after it was learned that our Burra resident overseas trained doctor, Dr. Dharma Dissanayake, had been denied attending rights at Burra Hospital for accidents and emergencies, having initially been credentialed to do so when she and fellow doctor and husband Dr. Lakman Fernando replaced Dr. Tim Simpson at the Burra Medical Centre. She began seeing patients on the 27th of December 2007, according to a Mid North Broadcaster article by Lisa Bachmayer.

Previously, before coming to Burra, Dr. Dissanayake was practising at Blakeview in Adelaide SA with her fellow practitioner and husband Dr. Lakman Fernando. She obtained her medical degree in Moscow during Russia's communist era circa 1988 and moved to Sri Lanka where she met her husband who completed his studies in

Colombo the year earlier. The couple then moved to New Zealand before finally arriving in South Australia in 2000.

Since April 2010, Members of the Group of Concerned Burra & District Residents have been actively campaigning to resolve the ongoing and current impasse which prevents Dr. Dharma Dissanayake from attending accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital. We met with the Premier, Mr. Mike Rann on the 29th of May 2010 and the Director, Yorke and Lower North Health Services, Country Health SA, Mr. Gary Stewart, on the 15th of June 2010.

We attended the Regional Council of Goyder Meeting on the 21st of September 2010 to hear Mr. Tony Gwynn – Jones, Chair of the Lower North Health Advisory Council (LNHAC) and Ms. Barbara Carlin, acting in Gary Stewart's position address Council. We met with them separately following their address. One of the members of our Group, Ms. Helen Edwards, has since been appointed to the Lower North Health Advisory Council.

On the 3rd of November 2010, Members of our Group met with the Minister for Health, Mr. John Hill, having drawn up a Petition calling for a resolution to the issue and an independent inquiry which was signed by hundreds of Burra and District residents and subsequently tabled in the SA Parliament by Greens MLC, Ms. Tammy Franks.

We have since been instrumental in instigating a SA Parliamentary Inquiry by the Social Development Committee to "inquire into and report on the current provision and plans for future delivery of Health Services in Regional South Australia" ...proposed by Ms. Michelle Lensink MLC. Among the proposed terms of reference are "(9) The reduction of admission rights for country general practitioners and the consequences for the provision of accident and emergency services across Country Health SA (CHSA) and community hospitals".

In her speech proposing the inquiry in late February 2011, Ms. Michelle Lensink MLC said the following about the situation in Burra:

"There are also concerns with the Burra Hospital, and I report from the local media, as follows:

'Until one day in April 2010 things at the Burra hospital were chugging along, with a doctor in attendance to handle emergencies as well as other regular doctor-type things. On that day, with absolutely no prior warning, our doctor's activities were dramatically curtailed and she was forbidden henceforth to associate with emergencies. The hows, whys and wherefores of this have never been explained by Country Health SA other than to state that the doctor was no longer qualified to undertake these duties and that they were not at liberty to divulge anything else.'

So if nothing else, that community deserves an explanation of why that has occurred."

The proposed SA Parliamentary Inquiry, likely to be supported by the Minister for Health Mr. John Hill:

... “if we can come up with a neutral form of words I would be happy to support it, because it is my view that we have a very good story to tell”...

is due to be debated this week.

On the 21st of March 2011, the Lower North Health Advisory Council (LNHAC) convened a Community Forum in Burra prior to their regular meeting to discuss “the future planning of health services in the local area.” With less than a week’s notice and with additional promotion and publicity by Members of our Group about 40 people attended the Forum to present their views.

My understanding of the current situation is that Dr. Dharma Dissanayake, Burra’s resident doctor, was initially credentialed to attend accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital and continued to provide them from the 27th of December 2007, or thereabouts, until April 2010. Complaints were made which were referred to and heard by the ‘Country Health SA Credentialling and Scope of Clinical Practice Advisory Committee’ and the decision was consequentially made to revoke Dr. Dissanayake’s attending rights at accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital.

At a later date, this same Committee reviewed the decision and made no change and the Appeal Process, as outlined in ‘The Policy for Credentialling and Defining the Scope of Clinical Practice for Medical and Dental Practitioners’, April 2009, has not eventuated in nearly 12 months. This has in part been due to the fact that legal proceedings are in place. Since April 2010, accidents and emergencies have been attended by SA Ambulance officers, triage nurses at Burra Hospital and attending doctors from Clare, half an hour’s drive from Burra, or a phone call away.

At the Community Forum, in my address, I referred to the effect of what has happened on the Burra and district community. I described it as profound and one that could not be underestimated.

“The level of confidence in Dr. Dissanayake has naturally diminished and many Burra and district residents are consulting doctors in Clare. That is their right and their choice. The Burra business community has been consequentially affected as patients combine a number of other activities while they are in Clare including seeking services, having meals and shopping. It is also natural and understandable for people in the Burra and district community to feel anxious about the continuing current situation and for the Burra Hospital in the absence of a satisfactory resolution of this ongoing issue.”

It would also be natural and understandable for people contemplating moving to Burra or the district community from other communities to feel anxious about the ongoing situation and the future of the Burra Hospital.

As emphasised to the Premier, Mr. Mike Rann on the 29th of May 2010, the Burra and district community comprises several thousand people both resident in the town and other small towns and properties in the broader district. It is a well established and popular tourist town where copper was first found in 1845, attracting thousands of visitors each year to appreciate its heritage and to attend the annual Burra Antique Fair and many other community events, such as the annual Burra Show. Burra attracts

visitors east from the Riverland, New South Wales, the ACT, Victoria and Queensland; north from the Flinders Ranges, outback South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia; west from the equally popular tourist destinations of the Clare Valley and the Yorke Peninsula and south from Adelaide, the Barossa, the Fleurieu Peninsula, the South East, Victoria and Tasmania. Burra is located on the Barrier Highway, one of South Australia's major highways en route to New South Wales via Broken Hill, about 4 hours drive away.

The local and district community participates in a variety of sporting activities including football, netball, basketball, hockey, tennis, swimming, martial arts, golf and lawn bowls. Burra has attracted a variety of industries in recent years including wind farms and mineral exploration and has an existing copper processing plant, Adchem. Burra has an ageing population as well as a number of families with young children who attend Burra Kindergarten and Burra Community School.

Members of our Group believe that a Burra resident doctor attending accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital is a minimum requirement for the provision of hospital services to Burra and the district community. Our view is supported by the 'Lower North 10 Year Local Health Service Plan 2010 – 2019' where it is stated on Page 9:

“Communities do not want to lose the services they currently have access to. An emergency service was identified by 65% of community respondents as a basic/minimum service required locally”...

Members of our Group are aware of government concern about the issue of registration processes and support for overseas trained doctors in the light of the Jayant Patel case, which is currently continuing to be heard through the courts. However, we are concerned that recent restrictions on attending rights to accidents and emergencies at local hospitals by overseas trained doctors could be seen as a means to an end to eventually close country hospitals and an overreaction, causing unplanned and unforeseen difficulties for local communities and flow on difficulties for neighbouring medical and hospital services and eventually metropolitan medical and hospital services.

The fact, where a Burra resident doctor remains unable to attend accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital after 12 months, is unacceptable. The likelihood of Burra being able to attract another resident doctor in the short term credentialed to attend accidents and emergencies at Burra Hospital remains unlikely, even remote, while the existing situation continues.

Processes must be improved and unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles removed in order to meet the needs and expectations of local communities with regard to the provision of ongoing services, while at the same time protecting local people from questionable and unscrupulous medical practises. The appropriate balance needs to be struck.

It is well known that people living in rural and remote communities have less favourable health outcomes than people living in metropolitan areas. It is crucial that existing rural and remote health services are retained to meet the reasonable requirements of people living in rural and remote communities.

Members of our Group commend the Minister for Health and Ageing, the Honourable Nicola Roxon MP for referring the issue of registration processes and support services for overseas trained doctors to the Standing Committee on Health and Ageing and wishes Members well in their deliberations to address the terms of reference and resolve current difficulties, including those regarding the current lack of provision of accident and emergency services by a resident Burra doctor at Burra Hospital.

If Members of our Group can be of further assistance to the Committee, then, please let me know. I am best contacted by mobile phone on 0488 231 481 or by email at tvm@capri.net.au I look forward to hearing from you and to hearing the outcome of the Standing Committee's deliberations and recommendations on this important issue.
Yours sincerely,

Helen Szuty.
Spokesperson.
Group of Concerned Burra & District Residents.
Former MLA, ACT Legislative Assembly 1992 – 1995.