

LGAT Opinion Editorial: As hospitals are swamped, it's time to focus on prevention at last

Investing in actions to promote health helps reduce disease and create communities in which people can lead productive and rewarding lives. Numerous reports warn of the growth in preventable chronic diseases, the cost to our health system and the increasing burden on individuals. Martyn Goddard's piece in Tuesdays Mercury painted a bleak picture, with patient demand in Tasmania predicted to increase by about 5000 admissions every year. However, prevention continues to be overlooked by both policy makers and the community, as we focus on the consequences of poor health - hospital services and hospital waiting lists. Early intervention is critical if we want to stem the ever increasing flow of hospital admissions.

It is an unfortunate reality that the focus of debate continues to be on our hospital system and treating disease, often at the expense of investigating and resourcing actions to improve health, and consequently reduce pressure on our health system. While our hospital system plays an important role in managing acute disease and illness, there is clearly scope for more emphasis on actions that prevent chronic disease. This early intervention can reduce or even eliminate the need for later care, that is often more intensive and more costly.

This issue is not just about the money we will have to continually invest in our health system in coming decades. Community wellbeing and productivity are closely related. The case for improving health is more closely aligned to productivity than is usually acknowledged. In practical terms, an individual's wellness impacts their capacity to function. At times this is only short term, however in other situations, their functioning is chronically inhibited for a long period. This will significantly impact an individual's productivity and often consumes other resources to support or compensate for their reduced abilities, at considerable cost.

While increased investment in preventative health and wellness activities is desperately needed, it is not just about the dollars spent. It is difficult for state governments to assess, appreciate and manage local health issues. This is where local government has an important role to play. It was no accident that when the current Local Government Act was developed in 1993, it identified providing "for the health, safety and welfare of the community" as the first function of councils.

Today, councils are recognised as essential partners in effective wellbeing and preventative health programs. They are the local place-based level of government that manage our local facilities and infrastructure and deliver local programs vital for the wellbeing of their individual communities. Local government officers and elected councillors are respected and valued by the community as our formal local representatives, easily available to the public and an important mechanism for decision making about local issues, including health and wellbeing. Of course, there are a large number of other agencies and organisations that provide necessary services into communities. However, they are usually not from the place or 'of the community' in the way that councils are.

While additional investment in our health system is necessary, if we are to reduce the demand a modest investment by the State Government in the local government health and wellbeing workforce will unlock the ability for every Tasmanian local community to implement effective community preventative health programs. Local government can provide a game changing role in

improving the health and wellbeing of communities, but only if we can leverage their local leadership via a long-term funding model, based on flexible service delivery.

By focussing our efforts locally we can more easily identify what will be successful and enduring in different communities by leveraging local knowledge and strengths. This does not mean that each place responds in an entirely independent manner, but that state policies and programs are applied with recognition of the characteristics, conditions, and opportunities within different local areas. Local government is the only level of government that can do this.

State Government efforts to address our chronic health issues will only be successful if it works in partnership with local government, with focus that is long term and grounded in local requirements. Wellbeing starts at a community level and by building upon the existing connections and expertise of our councils we will empower all Tasmanians to improve their health outcomes.

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