



**Submission to the Standing Committee on Public Administration: Inquiry
into the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme**

Wheatbelt GP Network

16 May 2014

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To the Standing Committee on Public Administration,

RE: Inquiry into the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme in Western Australia

The Wheatbelt GP Network (WGPN) is a not-for-profit primary health care services provider delivering service in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia. WGPN is an agency that provides General Practice, allied health, mental health and Aboriginal health services to the community. Through the delivery of these programs especially in conjunction with the Aboriginal Health programs such as Care Coordination and Supplementary Services and General Practice services WGPN has sought the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATS) for funding or support. WGPN also operates five General Practices in the Wheatbelt including three practices in Northam, one in Toodyay and one in Corrigin. These practices have also used or tried to use the scheme for assistance in transport of patients to specialist or other medical appointments.

WGPN as an organisation has had many issues with working with this travel scheme, especially for elderly, low socioeconomic, isolated or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients who may have less access to transport.

Issues experienced with PATS:

- Funding for accommodation falls far short of cost. Budget accommodation is often booked out, as well as not very comfortable or appropriate for elderly, sick people. (e.g. one case where a patient in her early 60s slept in her car in a park in Perth because she felt unsafe in the accommodation provided by PATS).
- Most Allied Health Services are not eligible for PATS funding, making it very difficult for our Wheatbelt residents to access providers such as dental or orthodontic services to mention just 2 of many.
- In the Wheatbelt, visiting Medical Specialists have huge waiting lists. But, under the eligibility criteria, patients must go onto the waiting list to access these Specialist Services as they are the 'closest available service'.
- The application process is cumbersome and difficult for many of our Wheatbelt residents living outside of Northam. Many of our ATSI patients travel to Northam to the GP working out of the Wheatbelt Aboriginal Health Service building, which WGPN manages. This practice is specifically



targeted at ATSI people and they provide a number of benefits by attending here as opposed to their local GP (similar to an Aboriginal Medical Service model). This means that they have to travel to Northam for the GP to complete the referral, which then needs to be lodged back in their home town at the local Health Service. Time frames are often tight, leaving little time to complete this process.

- Local PATS offices do not allow other service coordination providers to cover the gap for accommodation costs and to initiate bookings without prior approval. This has at times meant missing out on better quality accommodation for our patients. The Care Coordination Supplementary Services program is designed to assist ATSI patients in covering costs associated with management of their chronic disease. This could be better coordinated with PATS to ensure utilisation of available programs that complement each other. This is an administration issue that does not provide flexibility in solutions.
- Public transport in the Wheatbelt is at best poor, but in most areas non-existent.
- Many patients do not have the money to put petrol into their cars, and can therefore not wait to be reimbursed. Fuel vouchers would be more practical.
- Patients residing in the Toodyay area have little access to specialist appointments but are often excluded from PATS due to the eligibility requirements and proximity to Perth. There is no hospital in Toodyay and large waiting lists for specialists located in the Northam area, making Perth sometimes the only option. A large proportion of the population in Toodyay are elderly.

Context of the Wheatbelt regional features and geography is important to delivery of services and uptake of programs such as PATS. The Wheatbelt region is large geographically and extends from the coast north of Perth to the Western boundary of the Goldfields and south from the Darling Scarp to the northern boundary of the Great Southern Region. There are 45 local government areas and covers over 150,000 square kilometres. The regions population was estimated at about 80,000 in 2010. A characteristic of the region is its population dispersion across the 45 LGAs. This has resulted in no one regional hub, but rather four small service towns in Northam, Merredin, Moora and Narrogin. These towns only make up a small proportion of the overall population. For example only 9% of the population reside in Northam (Wheatbelt largest town) with a further 30,000 spread over 30 towns and the remaining population spread over 200 towns of less than 200 people.

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These characteristics of the region make health service delivery time consuming, expensive and difficult to access for many Wheatbelt residents. Programs such as PATS may benefit some more remote locations, but in reality many communities are not eligible for the scheme and those that are cannot access it in a timely or practical way.

WGPN is supportive of the idea of the Patient Assisted Transport Scheme and the benefits it could potentially have for many Wheatbelt residents. Although currently there are major gaps in the way primary care patients are able to access this service. The administration process is cumbersome and eligibility is not flexible or take into account unique regional factors that prevent many potential users of the scheme in accessing integral health services.

WGPN hopes that the inquiry will bring to light the inefficiencies and inequities of the program to better service Wheatbelt residents.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this submission.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul West', written in a cursive style.

Paul West
Chief Executive Officer