



Submission to the PATS Inquiry – Shane Love MLA Member for Moore

I thank the Public Administration Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

This submission is made on behalf of constituents in the Electorate of Moore which extends from Guilderton to Kalbarri and east to Toodyay, Dalwallinu and Mullewa, an area of some 72,000km². The 30,000 population is concentrated in the south of the electorate and in coastal communities, with a higher proportion of aged persons in retirement living in these coastal communities.

The Patient Assisted Travel Scheme provides important funding to regional patients required to travel for medical specialist appointments. However, there are a number of ways that the scheme could better meet the needs of regional patients:

- the level of reimbursement for travel and accommodation is out of step with current costs
- where medical services are not available locally in a timely manner, PATS should enable regional patients to visit a Perth-based allied health specialist
- eligibility should be extended to residents of Bindoon, Gingin and Toodyay to address the inequity that exists between these residents and those in York and Northam
- there needs to be some flexibility for patients in terms of where they visit specialists
- further refinement of the forms associated with the processing of PATS applications would simplify the application process
- provision needs to be made for the assessment of patients in exceptional circumstances
- development of the Fiona Stanley Hospital as the state's leading tertiary hospital may increase travel costs and further reduce access to budget accommodation for patients attending appointments who live in regional areas north of Perth

Visiting a metropolitan-based medical specialist has a physical, emotional and financial impact on country patients. It is understandable that a medical specialist referral comes with a level of anxiety – there is a health issue that needs investigation. It is not unreasonable that a patient would require an escort to attend the appointment, for moral support. In addition, patients and their partners or friends may have made a six hour return trip from their home to Perth, Northam or Geraldton. Some country residents are particularly nervous about driving in Perth traffic and many refuse and have a family member or friend escort them. Parking at some hospitals such as Hollywood can run into many dollars each day and if an overnight stay is necessary, accommodation in Perth is not only expensive, but at times difficult to find.

Level of funding

The PATS subsidy needs to be increased to better reflect the true cost of travel and sometimes accommodation when attending a specialist appointment in the metropolitan area.

The Australian Tax Office's **Tax Determination 2012/17** details the reasonable amount for meals and accommodation for travel to a number of cities throughout Australia. The determination for Perth is \$233 for accommodation with a further \$116.25 allowance for meals and incidentals, making a total daily allowable limit of \$349.25. PATS provides \$60/ night for commercial accommodation required for a medical appointment or \$75/ night for patients travelling with an approved escort. Those who elect to stay in private accommodation can claim \$20/night as an individual or \$40/night if travelling with an approved escort.

Country patients travelling to Perth for early appointments sometimes have to make arrangements to stay in Perth the night before. One particular car accident victim, aged 74 who lives 145km from Perth relies on local volunteers to drive her to monthly specialist appointments and elects to stay at YMCA Jewell House, a budget hostel in the centre of Perth. Although cheap at \$99/ night and very close to Royal Perth Hospital, online reviews indicate that the lifts are not always operational, it is noisy and guests don't always feel safe. There is no air conditioning in this hostel and only rooms with a shared bathroom are available. Availability at other budget accommodation located near hospitals such as Murray Street Lodge and Kings Park Motel has become severely limited in recent years. A single room at Kings Park Motel (3.5 stars) costs \$160 per night while a double or twin room is \$190 – vastly more than the \$60 or \$75 per night available under PATS.

A lack of accommodation for patients and family members in the vicinity of the new hospitals - Fiona Stanley Hospital and the new Midland Health Campus lth Campoutside of the concentration of accommodation in the CBD - could result in ramifications for regional patients and their family members. In addition, the travel time will be lengthened for those travelling from regional areas north of Perth to attend Fiona Stanley Hospital in Murdoch.

The PATS travel subsidy at 16c/km is markedly less than the ATO's allowable rate of 75c/km for a larger vehicle commonly used in the country. Fuel costs in the regions are generally higher than in the metropolitan area. According to FuelWatch, the average price for unleaded petrol in Perth on May 15, 2014 was \$1.55/ litre, whereas in Jurien Bay the same day it was \$1.69, with prices in that town known to reach \$1.78 during recent peak holiday times.

Eligibility for PATS

Patients in York and Northam are recipients of an exemption from the 100 kilometre PATS rule. In view of the lack of medical services in Bindoon, Gingin and Toodyay and to bring these towns in line with Northam and York, I request that residents of Bindoon, Gingin and Toodyay be made eligible for PATS. The requirement that PATS-eligible patients must be more than 100km
PATS Inquiry, May 2014.

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from Perth precludes the residents of Bindoon, Gingin and Toodyay. I acknowledge that PATS is a subsidy which enables patients to attend specialist medical appointments. However, there is no hospital in Bindoon, Gingin or Toodyay and the residents of these three communities have only the most basic of health services – a medical practice. In the event of an emergency after hours, patients are transferred to Joondalup, Swan Districts or Northam hospitals by volunteer ambulance officers.

There are hospitals in both York and Northam and despite the fact that these towns are less than 100km from Perth, residents from both towns qualify for PATS.

Residents of Bindoon have limited public transport and those reliant on Transwa bus services would likely have to spend two nights in Perth to attend specialist medical appointments, whilst residents of Gingin would probably have to find accommodation in Perth for one night, given the current bus timetable. Toodyay residents like their neighbours in Northam are fortunate to have the AvonLink train service connecting them to the metropolitan public transport system.

Residents in Dalwallinu report a lack of flexibility with medical specialist referrals. Since the PATS subsidy covers travel to the nearest specialist, appointments are made in Northam rather than Perth. Dalwallinu lies on the Great Northern Highway and most traffic flows to Perth. The road system connecting Dalwallinu to Northam is primarily a rural connector and is of a much lesser standard, being narrow. During harvest time it is particularly dangerous. Unlike the highway, this is not a road serviced by formal rest stops or service centres. There is no direct public transport option between Northam and Dalwallinu. This is not the cheapest nor a preferred option where patients are forced to make the trip overnight but have no family to stay with in Northam. Patients would prefer the option of visiting a Perth specialist, with whom they may have an established relationship. They indicated that they would like to be paid the equivalent of their Northam appointment - the nearest available option - but to have the flexibility of travelling to Perth.

Where medical services are not available locally, and residents are forced to travel to access a service, there is a case for subsidizing patients to attend that medical service. As there are limited medical facilities available in Jurien Bay after hours and no overnight stays possible at the medical centre, patients from that town have to drive to Moora Hospital (122km) or Joondalup Hospital (193km) for care after hours. A Jurien Bay patient with emphysema last year had to be transported to Moora Hospital by his wife late in the day. Because of the risk of hitting a kangaroo on the way home, she elected to stay in Moora the night. They were not eligible for PATS for the travel or accommodation as they were not accessing a 'specialist' medical service. Subsequent lengthy stays in Joondalup Hospital were not covered by PATS and indeed the wife of the hospitalized patient was fortunate to be able to stay with family near to Joondalup.

In a separate situation, a Cervantes man was transported to Joondalup Hospital late in the day by his wife because he had to be kept under observation – a service not available at the Jurien Bay Medical Centre. She waited whilst her husband was admitted to the ward and too tired to make the return trip home (170km) she fell asleep on a couch in a waiting room. With little hotel accommodation available in Joondalup, she was woken by a nurse sometime during the night who insisted that she could not sleep on the couch but had to leave the hospital. She spent a July night in her car in the hospital carpark.

The following allied health services are not covered by PATS: speech pathology, physiotherapy, podiatry, clinical psychology, occupational therapy, audiology, pathology and dental. Where a member of the public is unable to access the services of a medical professional such as a physiotherapist or speech therapist locally and in a timely manner, then I believe it fair that patients are offered financial assistance to enable a visit to a metropolitan-based medical specialist. There is currently a three to four month wait to see a physiotherapist in Moora, a dire situation for patients, especially those requiring an appointment immediately following an accident or surgery, to aid in their rehabilitation.

Similarly, developmental issues associated with delayed speech in children require treatment in a timely manner. Noticing delayed speech in her three year old son, a Coorow mother visited a paediatrician who referred her son to a speech therapist. Although a speech therapist nominally visited Coorow once per quarter, there was a lack of consistency in service.

Given the infrequency of visits, the mother concerned elected to find a private therapist in Perth and organised monthly visits. The alternative would have involved a nine month wait to see a Perth-based speech therapist through the public health system. These monthly visits involved a six hour return car journey. The therapist insisted that no additional children attend the session to avoid distractions, thus requiring occasional child care for her younger child during these sessions. Speech therapy is a service that is not covered by PATS and the family have borne this cost on their own.

Administration process

Patients report confusion when completing and lodging the blue and yellow forms required to complete an application for PATS. Reports of GPs providing forms for services that are ineligible for the subsidy point to a lack of understanding of PATS-eligible services, perhaps misleading and confusing patients. Because patients need a signature from the medical specialist to be visited, they need to be well aware in advance of the procedure surrounding the completion and lodgement of these two forms. A simplified system of application or a clearer explanation of the process would help patients enormously with their claim. Some patients found the PATS application process so onerous, they did not apply for the subsidy.

Where doctors have referred a patient to a particular specialist rather than one that is closest for a specific medical reason, this note should be kept on file for future PATS claims, rather than this explanation having to be provided with each and every patient referral.

Patients report that at times it can be difficult to contact the PATS Clerk, located in a centre such as Northam. Making the Community Resource Centre staff responsible for also administering the PATS scheme would improve the accessibility of this service.

Consideration of exceptional circumstances

For the reasons explained above, there needs to be a degree of flexibility within a scheme such as this. There will be some applications that will need assessing on a case-by-case basis and provision must be made for these patients. Flexibility however, needs to be matched with accountability.

Again, I thank the committee for allowing me to make this submission.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shane Love".

Shane Love MLA

Member for Moore

16 May 2014