



Rick Wilson

The Hon Simon O'Brien MLC

Chairman

Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs

Parliament House

PERTH WA 6000

1 September 2013

Dear Mr O'Brien

Thank you for your response to our petition regarding the suspension of maternity services at Katanning District Hospital.

Please find attached our two-page response as requested. We have also included as an appendix a number of submissions that have been sent to my office outlining the "stories" of people who have been impacted by the suspension of these services.

We would be pleased to provide further information, as well as witnesses prepared to give evidence to the Committee, if required.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Rick Wilson

Principal Petitioner

**PUBLIC**  
11/9/13

## **KATANNING HOSPITAL MATERNITY SERVICES**

Katanning is a town of more than 4,000 people and is the regional hub of the Central Great Southern. An additional 8,800 people live in the hinterland. For more than a century, babies have been delivered at Katanning District Hospital.

The maternity ward suspended its birthing services in May 2012 due to the lack of appropriately trained obstetricians and anaesthetists available to service the ward. Since then, women from Katanning and surrounding areas have been forced to travel to Albany (a distance of 170 kilometres) or Narrogin (just over 100 kilometres away) to give birth.

The distress this has caused pregnant women, and the disquiet and concern in Katanning and neighbouring towns is intense. Maternity facilities are a basic service and residents are astonished and outraged that the facility is no longer available. We seek to have the State Government urgently re-assess this situation and have the service re-instated as soon as possible.

The decision to suspend the maternity service also represents a fundamental disconnect between two State Government policies. Katanning has been designated a 'super town' through the Royalties for Regions program, with a stated aim of developing the town as a major regional centre with a population base of 15,000 people. But the suspension of birthing services at the Katanning Hospital will severely impact upon Katanning's ability to attract and retain new residents. Access to appropriate healthcare services is a key consideration in relocating, particularly when children are involved or a pregnancy is planned. The contradictory nature of these two policies is giving residents pause as they wonder about government's ability to implement cohesive policies.

I understand that the Hon Jim Chown MLC has provided the detailed technical background on this issue. What I, as the principal petitioner, want to do is draw your attention to the human impact of this decision. That impact has been profound for the women involved and for their families. Among the submissions we have received regarding this matter, one is from a woman who gave birth on the side of the road because she was unable to get to Albany Regional Hospital in time. Another is from a family that had to relocate to Albany for more than a month because of complications late in the pregnancy, and the financial stress that caused. Katanning is a town with a number of migrants. One young family, without the support networks many others take for granted and in this case without a car or a driver licence, were forced to take a taxi service to Narrogin for weekly checkups - a round trip of 210 kilometres. The pressure on the volunteer St John's Ambulance Service, which is often called on to take women to either Albany or Narrogin and therefore not available for significant periods of time, means there is no ambulance cover and other lives at risk.

This is an issue of extreme importance and urgency to all people of Katanning. Not just to the women who are either expecting a child or planning to have a child in the future, but to all their families - grandparents, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, family friends. Everyone in the community has a stake in the safe delivery of a child. Katanning cannot now offer that very basic service. For a regional centre the size of Katanning, it seems incomprehensible that a solution cannot be found.

In just three weeks, the campaign to Save Our Maternity Hospital collected 4676 signatures on a petition calling for this decision to be re-assessed. The tight time frame was set because we wanted to be able to deliver the petition before the Council rose for the winter recess. Since then, another 261 signatures have been received, taking the total to almost 5000. We have received detailed submissions from young women who want to relate their experiences, and related service providers also want the Committee to know how this decision has impacted on them.

Here are some of their stories:

In 6 weeks I am due to give birth to my second child. I have been advised by my doctor that I will need to head down to Albany and stay there for about two weeks prior to my due date. I can't book into a motel because we aren't sure exactly of the number of days we will need to stay, not to mention it would cost an absolute fortune! I have been trying to find someone who may have a holiday house that we may be able to hire for a few weeks, although I am due in the school holidays and most people who have a holiday house will be using it during this time. I will have Brooke (my daughter) with me and if I suddenly go into labour what will I do with her?? I can't take her to the hospital with me! We have no family in Albany...

*Expectant mother with one child*

..... I have a friend who is in Albany at this very moment awaiting the birth of her baby – she is scared, homesick, away from her partner and extended family. If the maternity ward at Katanning Hospital were open, she would not be in this situation.

*Friend of a young pregnant woman*

....My doctor advised that I would need to relocate to Albany a week prior to the due date of my baby. This meant I had to find accommodation for myself and my 2 year old child while my husband remained on our family farm as we were in the middle of our harvest which is the busiest time of year for us on our farm. This put incredible strain on me having to be the sole carer of my eldest child without the support of my husband, while also putting a huge strain on my husband being on his own during a very important time for our family business. I was also forced to be away from our close family and friends.....

*Farmer's wife*

As a result of early labour I had to relocate to Albany 2 ½ weeks before my due date. This labour stopped but I was advised not to return home as this was my 4<sup>th</sup> baby and labour could be very quick. Being separated from my family and not being in the comfort of my own home during the last few weeks of pregnancy was not ideal but for the safety of our unborn baby we had to.

This time proved to be stressful and financially draining. We are grateful to be able to claim a minimal daily fee through PATS but to date I still have not received my payment from eight months ago. We were extremely lucky to have a family support, reliable staff to manage our business in our absence and a place to stay. My husband made seven trips to and from Albany before our baby was born as he was juggling a heavily pregnant emotional wife, three children and our business. We eventually decided to pull our kids out of school just so we could all be together as a family.

*Mother of four*

We have seen a huge increase in demand for our volunteers to transport patients to Albany and Narrogin hospitals since the closure of the Maternity Ward. There have been several instances where women have only just made it to the destination hospital before giving birth and on at least one occasion the baby has been born in the back of our ambulance. As well as the danger created to the people of Katanning with our Ambulances and Volunteer Ambulance Officers being taken out of town at a moment's notice for up to eight hours, leaving the town often without an adequate emergency response, one thing that concerns me is the potential danger to the women who are forced to travel in our ambulance for hours to give birth. I fail to see how potentially giving birth in the back of an Ambulance parked in a truck stop on the way to Albany is preferable to giving birth in a specially designed Maternity Ward staffed by trained midwives.

*St John's Ambulance volunteer*

These are a selection of the submissions we have received from local people, many of whom want to appear before the Committee to give evidence. Note that this matter has not been referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (Ombudsman).