



# The Howard Government's Record

## THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT'S RECORD OF FAILURE ON AFTER HOURS CARE

### After hours medical care in Australia

Concerns about access to after hours primary medical care came to a head in the mid-1990s. In 1997 the Commonwealth Department of Health and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners convened a workshop to address the issue.

In response, the Government mounted the After Hours Primary Medical Care (AHPMC) trials. The primary purpose of the trials was to test and evaluate different local models of service provision and coordination and to assess the feasibility of their wider application. Each trial included a component of telephone triage.

In the 2001–02 Budget, the Government committed \$43.4 million over four years to extend the availability of these services. This means the current funding is entering its final year. In Tasmania, a real success story in after hours care, there has been no extension to funding beyond 30 June 2005 in this year's federal Budget and if it is to be re-funded in 2005, the service will receive only a few weeks' notice.

The AHPMC Program is now in its second phase and the Australian Divisions of General Practice (ADGP) have been contracted by the Department of Health and Ageing to manage it. The ADGP's draft position paper identifies the following problems with the current system:

- Increasing consumer expectations of accessible, equitable and affordable quality services, including an increased expectation of 24 hour service
- Reduction in real terms in general practice remuneration
- Loss of the higher clinic based after hours Medical Benefits Scheme rebate
- Decline in bulk billing and in availability of primary medical care after hours services
- Reduction in the GP to population ratio resulting in reduced access to GPs
- Shift from individual GP to a practice based responsibility within general practice
- Reduction in the number of GPs willing to work after hours

## **Howard Government funding of AHPMC**

Funding for programs operating under the current AHPMC Program is due to expire at various times between now and June 2005. In early July, Tony Abbott announced that funding for five services would be temporarily extended, but only to 30 June 2005.

The five services given this stay of execution were:

- The Bridges After Hours Service in Erina, NSW
- The After Hours + GP in Townsville, Queensland
- The Wagga Wagga After Hours Primary Care Medicare Service in Wagga Wagga, NSW
- The Rural Health Line in Mackay, Queensland
- Mercy GP After Hours Service in Perth, WA

Many other well established services did not receive an extension to their funding. This means that the Hunter After Hours GP Service and GP Assist, the Tasmanian triage telephone service, are facing closure in March 2005.

Despite strong pressure from State Labor Governments, the Howard Government has refused to extend support for successful local models and ensure all Australians have access to after hours care.