

**Op-ed: Keeping people below the poverty line will do nothing except add greater pressure to an already struggling health system.**

Health Consumers Tasmania believes the decision to keep the Jobseeker amount below the level that defines poverty is unethical and breaks the Government's own 'Australian Charter of Healthcare Rights' – a Charter that all Australian Health Ministers have signed up to. Under the Charter, everyone has the right to be able to access health care and this right is essential for the charter to be meaningful.

If Tasmanians cannot afford health care, and we know that in 2016-17 some 10% of Tasmanians delayed or did not receive health care due to costs, then how can they access health care when they require it? They cannot.

What does this mean for Tasmania and our health system for those living on the North West Coast?

By keeping the Jobseeker payment under the poverty line, we are forcing people to choose to spend the little money they receive on either food to eat, housing costs, paying bills or health care – and the first to go is usually health care.

We know many Tasmanians cannot access a GP because they can't afford it, fewer GPs are now bulk billing, resulting in out-of-pocket expenses for 49.5% of GP patients in Tasmania, which is the highest rate in the country outside the ACT.

So where do these people go when they get sick? They wait till their condition has deteriorated to the point that they have no choice and are forced to go to the Emergency Department to be treated. Through no fault of their own, their health has deteriorated because they could not afford to take action when they needed to. Tasmanians repeatedly tell us they do not want to go to hospital, they want to access treatment either at home or within their community, but it is getting harder to access health care in the community.

People in Burnie and Devonport have told Health Consumers Tasmania that it is the simple things that people without income struggle with. What if you can't afford a computer? How do you find about where to go if you can't log onto a website because that's how Governments communicate with communities these days? As a comment from a workshop in Burnie stated, "they just expect you to go to the library to access the public computers, but these don't work because you cannot have a private conversation in the library, so you just give up trying". What if you can't afford data? Many Tasmanians told us that telehealth, whilst a great initiative, does not work when people are not connected into the health system in the first place or cannot afford an internet package.

Those on the coast also had a strong view that communities and individuals want to take ownership of their health and wellbeing through better health prevention activities and through work and social activities. By not funding individuals adequately in the first place, it makes it very hard for people to engage in society that in turn, helps them to experience a healthy lifestyle.

This all contributes to and is one of the reasons we are experiencing a shortage of hospital beds and seeing hospitals ramping today.

In effect, the decision by the Federal Government to not bring the Jobseeker up to an adequate level is putting more pressure on our hospital systems and at the same time, transferring that cost away from the Federal Government and onto State Governments.

For the Tasmanian Government, this is breaking our health budget that has gone from 25.3% of total Government sector spending in 2008/09 to 32.3% in 2018/19 and could climb to 42%.

It is in all our interests that we make sure that our fellow Tasmanians do not live in poverty. That we stop ignoring the good learnings that emerged during COVID-19, where we supported all those in our communities – those with and those without; and we make sure all Tasmanians can access health care they need when they need it.

At the moment, Jobseeker is not a safety net, as the Federal Government thinks it is, because it does not keep people out of poverty - a necessary ingredient to allow all people to live a healthy life with dignity. The current safety net is so leaky that a staggering one in ten Tasmanians fall through it.

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