



Nats challenge Rudd to visit rural hospitals

By Danielle Cronin
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Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was urged yesterday to step outside his comfort zone to see the real damage in the health system and to resist the temptation to make incremental reforms.

Mr Rudd made the second stop on his "warts and all" tour of public hospitals to seek feedback on a report recommending sweeping changes to the health system.

He plans to visit 25 major hospitals – including Canberra and Calvary – to speak with people on the "frontline".

Nationals Leader Warren Truss said Mr Rudd should move outside his comfort zone and visit rural hospitals to see the damage caused by the states.

"The hard-working health professionals in regional public hospitals have plenty of stories to tell, and few of them will be positive," Mr Truss said.

"If Mr Rudd really wants to know what's going on in health care, he must go beyond the better resourced city teaching hospitals and see some of the medical facilities in regional and country towns.

"Even better, he should go to places with no hospital, no doctor and no medical services."

Mr Rudd plans to meet with groups representing regional and rural hospitals, private hospitals and the health profession to talk about the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission's report.

It made 123 recommendations, calling for a full or partial federal take-over of public health services and a more concerted effort to prevent disease.

Some of the proposals were to set-up comprehensive primary health-care centres opened after-hours and establish a universal dental care scheme – dubbed Denticare – to meet the cost of basic services such as check-ups, fillings and dentures.

The commission's proposed radical changes to Medicare would allow Australians to select

a health and hospital plan, offered by a public or private provider, to cover bills for Medicare services, pharmaceuticals and hospital treatment.

The Centre for Policy Development believed the Government must urgently tackle the inefficiency, inequity and needless complexity of the health system.

But the commission's recommendations "do not go far enough", according to the centre's founding director John Menadue.

"The role of subsidised private health insurance is insinuated throughout the report.



FRONTLINE: Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is touring public hospitals.

"Business journals show contempt for a \$6 billion subsidy for the motor vehicle industry over four years, but turn their head as the inefficient private health insurance industry picks up a \$5 billion subsidy per annum. This is real corporate welfare."

Mr Rudd, who visited yesterday the Flinders Medical Centre in Adelaide, said, "The reason I

want a mature national debate about this is that we tease all this out over the next six months or so, and rather than just having a, you know, an attitude as a nation which says rule in, rule out, yes, no, right, wrong, let's work it through."

The commission proposed the "biggest set of reforms since the introduction of Medicare" and it would come with a hefty price tag.

The estimated bill was up to \$5.7 billion in continuing costs, up to \$7.3 billion over five years for infrastructure and \$3.6 billion per annum for Denticare, which could be funded through a .07 per cent increase in the Medicare levy.



■ Safety and quality of health services will be enhanced if the Federal Government embraces e-health, according to a specialist and peak rural body.

In its report to the Government, the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission recommended every Australian should have an electronic health record by 2012 with the power to dictate who could view the information.

It suggested Medicare rebates should be available for “different types of services – email, telephone, tele-health [for example, video conference] – that do not involve physical presence of patient”.

we are recommending a transforming e-health agenda to drive improved quality, safety and efficiency of health care,” the commission stated in its 292-page report.

Professor Frank Sullivan, a Scottish e-health specialist visiting the Australian National University, applauded the recommendation.

Electronic health records would enhance the quality and safety of care for patients and help policy-makers and researchers by allowing information sharing.

The National Rural Health Alliance also supported e-health, saying it would improve the quality of care, especially in the bush.