MEDIA RELEASE
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HOSPITAL CAPACITY TO FIGHT CORONAVIRUS WILL BE LOST UNLESS STATES MOVE QUICKLY ON AGREEMENT

A coalition of hospital operators are warning crucial clinical staff will be stood down and private and non-profit hospitals closed in a matter of days following the suspension of all category 2 and 3 non-elective surgeries which has effectively strangled their revenue streams.

The Australian Private Hospitals Association, Catholic Health Australia, and Day Hospitals Australia said the private sector is prepared to play their part in the fight against COVID-19 but cuts to elective surgery and a failure of state governments to step up to support the sector will have dire consequences for Australia's future hospital capacity.

The hospitals are now faced with the very difficult decision to stand down staff and furlough services as a direct result, just when the entire health system is bracing itself for the surge in COVID-19 patients.

The sector is calling on the states and territories to honour the concerns acknowledged by Health Minister Greg Hunt in his proposed National Coronavirus Partnership on Wednesday. This Partnership, which will guarantee the viability of the private sector and in return, require a capacity guarantee, will enable the private hospital sector to maintain its full capacity and shift its service offerings towards the treatment of the coronavirus.

Between them, the private hospital system employs over 100,000 staff including 57,000 nurses across 650 hospital sites. There are well over 300 overnight acute private hospitals. More than a third of intensive care unit beds are in private hospitals, according to the Chief Medical Officer.

CHA Chief Executive Officer Pat Garcia said: "What should be happening at this time, in this breathing space we have before the full coronavirus onslaught, is all hospitals turn their attention to training up their existing clinical staff, and hiring additional staff – both clinical and non-clinical, to treat patients.

"We also acknowledge that winter, which is just around the corner, tests the hospital system at the best of times let alone when there is global pandemic. Hospitals cannot simply close down entire wards and ICUs, then turn them back on at the flick of a switch. If we need to close down wards and hospitals, they may not be available when we need them."

Michael Roff, CEO of the Australian Private Hospitals Association, said: "Negotiations with States and Territories have been fragmented, with some States well behind on negotiations. The states don't seem to understand the urgency of reaching a deal this weekend, if they don't do that, the beds they need in a few weeks' time may no longer be available."

"What we need is a national network of hospitals, coordinated between the States and the Commonwealth, and ensuring that our entire health system is at full capacity. Without a Commonwealth guarantee, private hospitals will start shutting their doors from early next week."

Jane Griffiths, CEO of Day Hospitals Australia said: "We've seen what's been happening in Spain and Italy, where patients don't have access to ventilators and ICU beds. The capacity of the private hospital system in Australia is enormous. We must act now to ensure that capacity is available when we need it. "

The private hospital sector will cooperate in whatever way it can to assist all governments with the development of the National Coronavirus Partnership. A number of for-profit and non-profit private hospitals are currently in discussion with the states and territories to assist in the development of mechanisms designed to maintain the viability of the clinical capacity provided by the private hospital sector.

Nevertheless, the sector believes it is unlikely a nationally consistent position can be reached via individual negotiations with each of the states and territories in the timeframe necessary to maintain viability and capacity of the private hospital system.

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