

| EDITORIAL FEATURE

Title: A sustainable health care system

Subtitle: The future needs to embrace the day hospital sector

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Quote: There needs to be an emphasis on advancing the required nursing skill sets to accommodate alternative health delivery settings.

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The future for our healthcare system is to embrace the Day Hospital Sector

My passion for day surgery began when I was a senior nursing executive at a large private hospital. I was given a wonderful opportunity to go on a sabbatical to the United States of America to study trends in ambulatory surgery - the equivalent of Australian day hospitals.

It was then that I realised that to secure the future sustainability of the Australian healthcare system, Australia needed to embrace the day hospital sector.

Now, as the CEO of Day Hospitals Australia, observing the various crises across our healthcare system, I know that day hospitals remain one of the central ways to move our system forward.

Twenty-five years ago, I visited numerous Ambulatory Surgery Centers in California, Pennsylvania, and Illinois over a seven-week period. The exposure to these specialised centres heightened my enthusiasm to take this quality, safe, efficient, and cost-effective model of care back to my hospital and to share it more broadly.

At the time, my hospital was developing an innovative extension to the original facility, which would see a purpose-built Medical Centre with connection to the main hospital and the perioperative services suite located on the top floor that would include a day procedure unit. The CEO at the time encouraged the development of this concept with respect to the hospital's day patients, who, with this new addition, would enter the day unit via the Medical Centre and would not be exposed to the main hospital. Within the operating suite there was to be a dedicated pod of four operating rooms to be dedicated for same-day surgery, thus creating conditions similar to a standalone day hospital.

However, due to unforeseen circumstances the new facility was not utilised as intended and after a few months, I also left the organisation.

The knowledge and experience I had gained in the US spurred me on to look for opportunities in Australia's day hospital sector. I really believed that this sector needed to be explored and expanded in Australia for the future sustainability of the healthcare system.

My first role in the sector was as Business Manager of a doctor-owned day hospital and during my time there I introduced a paediatric ENT service for uninsured patients who had been on the waiting list at the children's hospital for some time. When the ENT surgeons realised how efficient the day hospital was, they brought their private patients there as well. The day hospital setting, and model of care is ideal for children. The environment is small, and a parent can stay with them throughout their journey, with the exception of the actual procedure once the child has been anaesthetised.

I was appointed to the Board of the Australian Day Hospitals Association, (now known as Day Hospitals Australia) serving as Vice President for one year, followed by five years as President. During this period the day hospital sector grew significantly particularly in Queensland, NSW and Victoria. Today, there are over 360-day hospitals throughout Australia both in metropolitan and rural areas.

The sector has changed over time from predominately doctor-owned facilities to the expansion of larger groups of day hospitals. This has partly occurred due to the additional legislative and regulatory requirements for all hospitals, particularly in relation to the introduction of the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards introduced in 2013.

With the workforce challenges all healthcare facilities face there are real opportunities for student nurse clinical placement and graduates in day hospitals. The universities have been very enthusiastic about this as the student has the opportunity to experience the whole episode of care in one placement. Encouragement has also been provided to accommodate new graduate nurses - in fact one of the largest groups of day hospitals has provided a perioperative program for graduate and other interested nurses to increase their skills.

The Private Health Insurance Act 2007 referred to the requirements of private hospitals, which included day hospitals, to enable funding through private health insurance.

We still have issues with misunderstanding in the sector of what a day hospital is - some jurisdictions and the Australian Commission for Safety and Quality in Healthcare refer to day hospitals as day procedures centres which exacerbates this issue. The sector needs to work with the Federal and Jurisdictional governments to ensure correct and consistent terminology for day hospitals. The definition of a standalone day hospital needs to reflect the internationally accepted definition, which is, "A Day hospital is a freestanding facility offering surgical and procedural services requiring hospitalisation less than 24 hours."

Along with a Gastroenterologist, I represent Australia on the General Assembly of International Association of Ambulatory Surgery. Exposure through this association has identified further the need for Australia to change the current paradigm. What is inconsistent with international practice is that in Australia we have seen growth in same-day surgery developing at a faster rate in the large overnight hospitals, rather than in the cost-efficient day hospital sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in patients being more apprehensive about treatment in large hospital institutions, preferring smaller facilities including day hospitals.

There are clear economic reasons that Day Hospitals are more viable in some cases. Day Hospitals Australia undertook a viability study recently, which demonstrated that the overnight hospitals are paid, on average, 40 per cent more by private health insurers for the same day procedures performed in the day hospital sector.

With the growing pressure on the Australian healthcare system, day procedures should be provided in the day hospital sector for suitable patients. In Australia, we are slowly seeing more advanced procedures, such as joint replacements, being performed on a short stay and same day basis. Our study identified a potential saving of half a billion dollars if the top 32 DRGs were performed in the day hospital sector, rather than as same day cases in the overnight hospital sector.

It is clear that the private health sector is not on a sustainable trajectory and this in turn will impact the future of the public healthcare system.

Healthcare industry stakeholders have an obligation to advocate for change so that quality healthcare can be delivered cost-effectively, safely and in the appropriate setting. Nurses have a significant role to play in leading the change that will provide sustainability for both the public and private healthcare sectors.

There needs to be an emphasis on advancing the required nursing skill sets to accommodate alternative health delivery settings. Patient selection, followed by preadmission assessment, particularly to day hospitals, care in the community and care in the patient's home will all become part of the total episode of care. There will need to be collaboration with other allied healthcare professionals in providing this alternative approach to patient care. The proposed savings by more appropriate use of the day hospital sector would make a substantial contribution to the viability of the healthcare system.

There is a lot to be done to change current practice regarding same-day surgery and medical care in Australia. Collaboration between medical specialists, nurses, day hospitals, private health insurers and governments will be essential to change the paradigm.