CAIRNS UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

THE ISSUE

Expanded clinical services and a qualified and comprehensive workforce at Cairns Hospital are critical for meeting the health needs of Tropical North Queensland’s (TNQ’s) growing population. Over the past three years, the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service (CHHHS) has addressed this need with an expansion of clinical services, including:

- locally based urology services;
- a new adolescent ward;
- 24-hour availability of the cardiac catheter laboratory;
- an expanded intensive care unit;
- a dedicated stroke service; and
- increased cancer care services.

In 2019 the State Government announced an operating budget for CHHHS of $1 billion, plus $70 million to upgrade the Mental Health Unit, $2.8 million to build a second catheterisation laboratory and $4 million for a vascular surgery theatre.

In coming years, the CHHHS is aiming to obtain Level 6 status in a range of clinical areas including endoscopy, cardiac (coronary care unit), cardiac medicine, some medical and surgical specialties, perioperative (operating suite and post anaesthetic room) and anaesthetics, reducing the need to travel outside the region for medical treatment.

Following these investments, the Cairns Hospital will be delivering its highest level of care to date. However, to cater for growing demand and address the critical health challenges facing TNQ, there remains an urgent need to continue to increase surgical capacity (outpatients, pre-admission clinic and operating theatre time) and to recruit Cairns-based clinicians to provide specialist services currently being delivered elsewhere.

The CHHHS has recently completed a master planning process identifying infrastructure needs worth an estimated $500 million over the next 20 years and is now seeking $10 million to complete a detailed business case to map out this significant upgrade.
OUR RECOMMENDATION

- Additional funding is sought to facilitate the transition of Cairns Hospital to Cairns University Hospital (Level 6 referral status).
- That the State Government provides $10 million in 2019-2020 for a detailed business case to support implementation of the CHHHS master plan over the next 20 years.
- That to support the training of a regional medical workforce, the Federal Government allocate an additional 50 Commonwealth Supported Places and 30 International places recurrent, together with an allocation of Destination Australia scholarships to JCU's School of Medicine and Dentistry.

NEXT STEPS

To successfully transition Cairns Hospital to Cairns University Hospital, an increase in Level 6 services is required over the next three years across specialties such as cardiac medicine, endoscopy and other medical and surgical specialties.

Master planning by CHHHS has also identified the need for an estimated $500 million in infrastructure during the next 20 years with $10 million now needed for a detailed business case.

In addition, to support the training and recruitment of Cairns-based clinicians, JCU requires an additional 50 Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) and 30 international places recurrent for the JCU Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) program. This will allow JCU to offer years 1-6 of the MBBS in Cairns and Mackay. The additional places will be distributed across the regional centres of Cairns (30), Mackay (10) & Townsville (40).

BACKGROUND

In 2018-2019 there were 74,667 presentations to the Cairns Hospital emergency department, a 24% increase over the preceding five years, and 82,727 patients were admitted to the Hospital. Throughout 2019 the emergency department has faced unprecedented pressure, averaging 211 patients per day, a 4% increase on the previous year. Also 30% of emergency patients are tourists or people who live outside Cairns, in rural and remote areas including Cape York and Torres Strait.

The Cairns Hospital supports an estimated resident population of 278,080 and regularly provides acute medical services for residents of the Cape and Torres region (population of 26,399). Combined with estimated population growth of 1.1% per annum, and an ageing population, it is estimated that by 2026 an additional 67,000 people will reside in the catchment area with close to one in five residents being over 65. The Cairns Hospital also provides medical services for the three million tourists that visit the region annually.

Demand for CHHHS services will therefore continue to increase, requiring continued investment in specialised training for the local health workforce, with current planning predicting an extra 80 inpatient beds are needed by 2028 and 223 by 2037. When combined with the expansion of University medical training facilities in the region, particularly by James Cook University (JCU), there is growing momentum to upgrade Cairns Hospital to Cairns University Hospital. For example:

- Based within JCU's Division of Tropical Health and Medicine, JCU proposes to establish a Tropical Global Health Centre to produce research-enabled clinicians with extensive clinical training in population health and global public policy. The Centre will leverage investment in the Cairns University Hospital to provide students with globally relevant training and deliver a medical workforce specifically prepared to handle regional health challenges. Although initially focused on the medical workforce, the program will subsequently expand to include nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, allied health and veterinary health professionals.
- The CHHHS strategic plan includes a priority to build a Research, Education and Innovation (REI) Centre in Cairns that will provide state of the art research and education infrastructure for the region. Once constructed, through partnerships with educators, scientists, medical practitioners and technology firms, the $150 million REI Centre will ensure skilled health workers are attracted to, and remain in the region, building clinical capability to improve patient outcomes in the region.
- Cairns Hospital is the first regional digital hospital in Australia, which demonstrates its ability to manage the operational change required to progress to level 6 service delivery.

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*Various studies underway to finalise requirements