

Australia Dossier By Robert Barwick

Killing people to save money

Health professionals are beginning to revolt against genocidal budget cuts.

Simmering tensions among health professionals, because of years of budget cutting against the Australian health system, exploded in July, with the hospital systems of the country's two largest states thrown into crisis. The health unions in the state of Victoria have begun rolling work stoppages to gain better working conditions, while in New South Wales (N.S.W.), the nation's largest state, senior doctors have bitterly protested demands from the state government that they reduce their hospital budgets this year—again—by \$9 million each.

This widespread revolt by doctors is a first, but they have decided to speak out because, as Prof. Graeme Stewart of the Westmead Hospital in Sydney told the July 12 *Sydney Morning Herald*, "This is not just a Westmead problem or even a N.S.W. problem, it is an Australia-wide problem."

On July 3, Dr. David Dilley, a surgeon at Sydney's Westmead Hospital, wrote a scathing letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the city's major daily paper, describing the Westmead Hospital as being held together by "string, chewing gum, Band-Aids, and baling wire." "Our system is undermanned, underfunded, and run a long way below its full potential, especially in regards to beds lying fallow," he charged. "People will die unnecessarily because of our bureaucrats and politicians." In fact, they already have, and doctors have committed suicide because of the strain.

Days later, senior doctors at the hospital defied a health department gag order on speaking out about working conditions, and angrily declared

that there was no way anything could be cut out of the budget, because the last decade of cuts had meant that there was no "fat" left to cut. The head of the division of medicine, Prof. Rick Kefford, said that the cuts had brought the hospital to a "knife-edge."

Since 1993, almost 1,000 staff positions have been lost, including nurses, maintenance staff, cleaners, and doctors. There were about 505 doctors in 1983; there are now fewer than 350. More than 150 beds have been closed, yet 1,000 more patients a year are pushed through the hospital than five years ago. "The degree of sickness you have to have to be admitted to this hospital has escalated enormously," Professor Kefford said. "And then you are kicked out as soon as you can walk."

The N.S.W. state health system, which represents one-quarter of the state budget, has been systematically looted. When Westmead Hospital opened, it had more than 1,000 beds; there are now 750 beds open, and the proposed cut would reduce that number to 660. It is a tale repeated across Sydney: The Prince of Wales Hospital in Randwick has had about \$30 million cut from its budget in the past three years, losing 250 beds and 270 staff; Royal North Shore, St. Vincents, St. George, the Sydney Children's Hospital, Nepean, Coffs Harbour, and the John Hunter and Mater hospitals in Newcastle, have all been notified to expect less money this year.

The hospital crisis has, in turn, thrown the ambulance service into chaos. The ambulance union reported on July 14 that some ambulances are being dispatched 30 minutes after re-

ceiving the emergency call—15 times later than service standard—because of bottlenecks caused by the fact that 20% of emergency departments at Sydney hospitals are effectively closed every day because they can not cope with demand. "Patients are facing the double whammy of waiting for an ambulance to get them, and waiting for up to five hours once they reach the hospital," a senior ambulance officer told the July 15 *Sydney Morning Herald*.

For his part, N.S.W. Health Minister Craig Knowles has defended the budget cuts, blustering, "There are legitimate questions whether just throwing money at the system gives you better health care." He claimed that it was merely the winter flu which is causing problems, and he cynically dismissed the doctors' complaints as the "usual argy-bargy" during budget negotiations.

The health system of Victoria, under Premier Jeff Kennett and Health Minister Rob Knowles, is also in crisis, currently racked by industrial action over working conditions, which Kennett blames on "greedy unions," instead of his own "slash and burn" budget cuts. Victorians have already died because of the health cuts, while the hospitals are riddled with "golden staph" infection, directly caused by budget cuts. The privatization, budget-slashing mania of both Kennett and N.S.W. Premier Bob Carr, who has personally blocked any increase in that state's health budget, was devised by the British Crown's Mont Pelerin Society, of which both premiers are stooges, through local front groups such as the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and the Tasman Institute. Carr is a proud member of the CIS, while Kennett's entire administration, since he was first elected in 1992, has been directed by the Tasman Institute.