

INSIDERS

Shake-up to 'genuinely reform' health system

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Health Minister Nicola Roxon says the Government's proposal to take on the lion's share of health funding will end the hospital blame game.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Nicola Roxon, good morning, welcome.

NICOLA ROXON, HEALTH MINISTER: Good morning.

BARRIE CASSIDY: So there's an Opposition Leader leading by example. As Health Minister you would encourage that wouldn't you?

NICOLA ROXON: Look I think it's you know to be admired that Tony is putting himself through this. Ultimately we don't have an issue with what Mr Abbott chooses to do.

What we do have an issue with is that so far he doesn't have a health policy. He doesn't have many other policies.

And now it's up to him how he balances his time and produces his work and keeps himself fit.

And I can promise your audience that you're not going to see me in that lycra or my bikini at any time soon. But I think it's admirable that he can do it.

What we do have an issue with is he doesn't seem to be producing any policy at the same time.

BARRIE CASSIDY: But Wayne Swan, Julia Gillard and others have taken a different approach. They've already been critical of the fact that he spends so much time on his fitness.

NICOLA ROXON: Well what I think you heard both Wayne Swan and Julia making the point about was that we are in a contest of ideas, of developing plans for the future, of delivering for the community.

So far he hasn't contributed in that contest. That's the issue, not what he chooses to do on his weekend.

I think Wayne Swan was a little bit wistful, almost jealous that he doesn't have as much time to do some of the things he would like to. That's the reality of the jobs that we have in government.

And it is a lot of time. I think it's a fair question to say: does that amount of time actually have an impact on the lack of policy development that we're seeing from the Opposition?

BARRIE CASSIDY: But then if the public was to ask themselves: who do they think gets their work and fitness balance right, Kevin Rudd or Tony Abbott, what are they likely to say?

NICOLA ROXON: Well look and I think it's a very, everyone has their own balance.

I would like to exercise more but then I'd have less time with my young daughter. You know we all make choices about what we do in busy lives.

I'm certainly not going to pass any judgment about the choices that Tony Abbott makes.

And I do think it's good to have people setting an example. But his approach even as health minister was always the government isn't going to help in particular ways because everyone should just look after their own health.

Not everyone can do the triathlon or the sorts of feats that Mr Abbott can.

We do need to have policies that see the government assist in people leading healthier lives. We're doing that. It wasn't something Mr Abbott liked to do.

But more importantly we are trying to reshape and reform the health system for decades to come. That's a big job which I frankly would like to see Mr Abbott engaging in more.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Well we'll talk about that now. And John Brumby has been critical of your efforts so far. A list of 10 questions were published in a newspaper but he says there are about 40 questions now.

The key concern seems to be that it won't end the blame game at all because neither side, neither government, neither state nor federal will be the sole funder.

NICOLA ROXON: Well I don't agree with that. I think the main flashpoint for the blame game and finger pointing of the past has been that the Commonwealth used to negotiate an agreement every five years, fix the amount of money that we were paying, hand that over to the states.

And any growth in demand or change in population or change in patterns of illness or expense of providing medical care, that was borne by the states.

By us fixing the share that we will pay into the future we for the first time are actually accepting some exposure to that growth and to those costs.

And I think that Mr Brumby is doing what premiers can be good at. Of course he has a log of claims, a list of demands that he would like to pursue.

But this is a big change and it does mean that the key flashpoint for the blame game in the past will actually be removed; not to mention of course taking over all of the funding and policy responsibility for out of hospital care, changing the way that we have clinical guidelines in place to improve standards of care.

These are big changes that put the Commonwealth in the hot seat and in the driver's seat if you like for change.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Yeah but you used an expression yourself. You said you will have some exposure, not all of it. Some exposure.

So how will people know, how will the patients know who is actually managing the system?

NICOLA ROXON: Well it's very clear who is going to be managing the system under our plan. The local hospital networks will be managing the system.

BARRIE CASSIDY: So the blame rests with them?

NICOLA ROXON: The Federal Government will take on the lion's share.

What you've got to understand - it's not just actually reducing some of the exposure or changing it.

We need the states and territories to be committed to running their hospitals, their role continuing to actually be effective.

If we take on 100 per cent tomorrow you have huge disruption in the system and you actually give the states the excuse to walk away and disinvest immediately.

Now I don't think the public want that to happen. I don't think we should give the states that opportunity.

And this is a big change which allows us to transform the system while keeping delivering services to the public which is critical.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Yeah sure. I still go back to the point though when things go wrong who do you blame? Do you blame the local boards? Do you blame the Federal Government? The State Government?

NICOLA ROXON: Well I think it's very clear what happens. If things go wrong with your rostering or your particular service delivery it should be your local hospital network.

This is what doctors and nurses are calling out for, having more responsibility and ability to affect things that affect their service.

If it's funding...

BARRIE CASSIDY: So the buck won't stop with Kevin Rudd at all. The buck will stop with the local boards.

NICOLA ROXON: Well I was about to go on and say if it's funding it clearly will be the Commonwealth that people will look to because we are taking on the lion's share of funding for our hospital services.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Do you suspect that Tony Abbott now will come out in support of 100 per cent funding and then say, well that's the way to end the blame game?

NICOLA ROXON: Well you'd have to ask Mr Abbott. I don't think he's shown any inclination to do anything reformist in this space.

He was the health minister for twice as long as we've been in Government and he was very adamantly anti-reform.

He said that explicitly in many speeches. So I think it would be unusual for him to come out and do that.

On the other hand he's mulled about it before and not taken this path. So maybe he'll see he has to do something.

But my worry is this is a detailed plan. It's a really big problem. It's probably one of the most pressing issues for the public and we haven't seen anything.

We haven't seen Mr Abbott engage in the debate.

He hasn't even been interested to get a briefing from our officials on the plan. I mean even the Liberal Opposition leaders in the two states that have just had elections have taken that up.

It seems to me a very disengaged sort of way to go about dealing with a very big problem in our system.

BARRIE CASSIDY: But then you desperately need the support of the states don't you? Because you wouldn't want another situation where in the end process outdid the reality. You need a result.

NICOLA ROXON: Well I don't actually think it's about whether we need a result. I think the public needs a result. People are sick of this having been a problem for decades to come.

I think there is a lot of pressure on premiers and on us to get an agreement which will genuinely reform things and set up the system for change into the future.

So yes there is a lot of pressure to do that. You don't get many opportunities I don't think in the course of political life to deliver this sort of change. So there is a lot riding on this, both for us and for the community.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Some of the other criticism coming not just from John Brumby but others is that you're not saying enough and doing enough about preventative healthcare; you're not doing enough about primary care.

NICOLA ROXON: Well I think we should look at what we've already got runs on the board for.

The COAG deal in the end of 2008 is actually the first time there's been a massive investment into preventative care - \$872 million.

Those projects are starting to run. In fact I'm announcing a number of them tomorrow. So those sorts of issues I think we're already seeing change. We can always do more.

In primary care we've made major investments both in the way we fund our workforce - nurse practitioners and midwives getting access to Medicare for the first time.

Our GP super-clinics are starting to roll out across the country.

We've flagged very much the directions we intend to take here. But there are significant reforms that are needed so we can actually do more.

I mean Australia has one of the highest hospitalisation rates in the world which is very surprising really when you think about our system.

That's because we don't always coordinate the care out of hospitals very well. We need to do that and that will be one of the key deliverables for taking pressure off our hospital system.

BARRIE CASSIDY: So what are you announcing tomorrow? Are these initiatives that are born out of the criticisms that are coming from the premiers?

NICOLA ROXON: No these are actually part of the arrangements that have already been agreed with the premiers.

And a reminder I guess to Mr Brumby that in the end of 2008 we put a lot of Commonwealth money into prevention.

These are grants that are going to councils to deal with obesity and fitness and getting people involved in all sorts of activity that's better for their health; health checks etc.

The point I'm just making is a lot has been happening for the last two years. A lot more needs to be done but we're not starting from a blank piece of paper.

We're not turning up to COAG and saying, we've you know sat on our hands for two years and now we want the states to change.

We've put our money where our mouth is. That's starting to deliver results. And now we want to take the next steps with the states and territories.

BARRIE CASSIDY: As this debate has unfolded certainly a perception has arisen that Victoria has the best system, New South Wales and Queensland the worst. Now is that a fair summary of the situation?

NICOLA ROXON: Look I think Victoria does have a good system. And I'm a Victorian. I had my daughter in a public hospital. The services were great.

I think though that you know Mr Brumby and the health minister might be overstating things if they think everything is perfect. Victoria doesn't rank the highest on a whole lot of indicators for hospitals.

So we're not really into comparing between all the states. We just want to be able to improve the system across the board.

And I do think it's a bit of a risky position for premiers to take, look everything's fine, we don't need to be involved in this debate. And the meetings that I've been at with Premier Brumby and Daniel Andrews have been constructive.

There are lots of issues still to be worked through but I think you can see some of them as a bit of an ambit claim. And obviously we've got a month or so to go 'til we get to COAG and I think you'll see a lot of debate and discussion between now and then.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Now aged care gets a lot of attention in the papers this morning, particularly in the Sun Herald. And they talk about aged care being at breaking point.

And in the last 12 months assaults have risen by 50 per cent, sexual assaults by 36 per cent. That must be of significant concern?

NICOLA ROXON: Oh look I think this is a horrifying report.

We have been taking a lot of action in aged care.

In fact your viewers would probably be surprised to know that the spot checks that we do in aged care, so the visits without notice that we're coming have increased seven fold in the time that we have been in Government because we are worried about these sorts of instances.

BARRIE CASSIDY: But it's not changing the practices?

NICOLA ROXON: Well I think that you have to look over the course of time. We have to make sure that we've got our compliance regime right.

We have to make sure that the accreditation is working well. We have to make sure the standard of care is high.

I think it's a constant challenge for us to be able to keep doing that. But the actions the Government is taking is really investing a lot more energy and time than the previous government did to make sure that those unannounced spot checks are happening.

We actually now are able to say that over the course of the year...

BARRIE CASSIDY: But you say you're doing more than the previous government but the situation is getting worse. Assaults are up by 50 per cent?

NICOLA ROXON: Look some of the figures don't quite match with the periods of time Barrie so I think we have to be a little bit careful with that.

But I'm not denying that this is a serious problem where governments need to make sure we are doing all we can to protect the vulnerable in our community.

And we are investing a lot more in aged care to make sure that proper care is taken of our very frail and elderly citizens.

But you know part of our reforms is also to deal with aged care. We haven't had the right incentives in place to provide any types of care between high level residential care and hospital care.

We've had home and community care packages but the funding arrangements being so divided have meant we've never said: what is actually better supported accommodation models?

What do the baby boomers of the future, what type of care and support will they need that might not be as high level as residential care?

And if we don't reform the financing and governing arrangements of our health system we'll never actually invest in those other innovative models because you'll have the states with the hospitals and us with aged care and never the twain shall meet. We just can't afford to keep doing that.

BARRIE CASSIDY: But then the nurses' federation says you can make fundamental changes too. You can get the elderly out of the hospitals and save about \$1 billion a year and use that money to build nursing homes and staff them properly.

NICOLA ROXON: Absolutely. The point I'm making is we should have the elderly that don't need to be in hospitals. Sometimes they do but some that are assessed as needing to be in aged care or some that need more time to recuperate and could return to their own home.

That's why we've invested so much in transition care and subacute care. We've already got hundreds, I think around 700 of those places online to help relieve some of that burden. We're building 2,000 of those places.

So it is a mix and a complex range of answers that will help fix that problem. But we need the spot checks, we need more transition care. We do need qualified staff in our aged care facilities. And we're taking action on all those fronts.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Okay just finally winter is on the way. Swine flu is still around. You're making as I understand it 21 million doses of the vaccination available. What's the take-up rate at this point?

NICOLA ROXON: We've provided around 7 million of those doses to GPs and State Governments as they've been requested. More of those are being deployed of course in the lead-up into winter.

Worryingly we've had the first hospitalisation of a young woman related to swine flu in the last fortnight.

This is a free vaccine. The Government has purchased it. It's available for everyone. It can be obtained easily for you and your families at your GPs.

And we do encourage people to do it, not just if they themselves are vulnerable but also to help protect the wider community.

If we have about a third of the community properly vaccinated that's on my advice sufficient to stop the rampant spread of a new disease. But obviously the more we can vaccinate the more desirable it is.

BARRIE CASSIDY: So a third hasn't actually been vaccinated. You've made those available.

NICOLA ROXON: We've made 21 million available. They're provided on demand to GPs as they order them.

We've encouraged people in the most vulnerable categories to prioritise it. We urged families when kids were going back to school to go and get them and themselves vaccinated.

The paediatric vaccine just became available at the end of last year so a number of families were waiting for that. Now everyone over six-months-old can have this vaccination and we do encourage people to do so.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Are you disappointed with the take-up rate up to this point?

NICOLA ROXON: No. I think that it's probably typically Australian when it's not front of mind to sort of leave it 'til a little bit later.

But we now are right on the cusp of the flu season coming back. It's a good time if you haven't done it already to get the vaccine.

It's been paid for by the Government so the only charges that you'll incur is if your GP charges a fee and most haven't been for this service. And we'd really encourage people to take it up.

BARRIE CASSIDY: Thanks for your time this morning.

NICOLA ROXON: Thanks.
