



Australian Government

Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Cities and Regional Development

Report on Public Consultations

PricewaterhouseCoopers' *Final Report: Indian Ocean
Territories Health Service* (March 2019)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Cities and Regional Development released PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PwC) Final Report (the Report) on the Indian Ocean Territories Health Service (the Health Service) on 29 March 2019. The Report is available on the Department's website at: www.regional.gov.au/territories/publications/index.aspx.

PwC was asked to investigate and report on:

- the nature, scope and delivery of healthcare in the Indian Ocean Territories;
- optimal staffing and governance arrangements for the Health Service;
- opportunities for private sector involvement in the delivery of services;
- best practice record management systems, and optimising use of E-health and Telehealth;
- options for the delivery of aged care.

In preparing its Report, PwC consulted extensively with the Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands communities, key stakeholders, regional and remote health service providers and the Western Australian Government.

The Report includes an assessment of health needs on Christmas Island and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, and an analysis of health services on the islands with comparable remote communities. The Report makes 25 recommendations, and will inform the development of a Five Year Strategic Plan for the Health Service.

1.2 Key findings and recommendations of the PwC Report

Community health needs in the territories and across the mainland are changing. The population is ageing, preventative medicine is playing an increasingly important role in maintaining health, and health issues related to social factors are becoming more prevalent (such as diabetes, obesity, recreational drugs, anxiety and depression).


The Report identified the following high priority needs:

- Increase aged care services due to the Indian Ocean Territories' ageing population;
- Clarify the Patient Assisted Travel Scheme (PATs) policy and governance; and
- Review the opportunity to increase telehealth use.

The Report also identified a number of other measures, including improving the Health Service's engagement with the community, addressing health behaviours and mental health issues, and improving governance arrangements for the Health Service.

1.2.1 Health behaviours and outcomes

Health outcomes in the Indian Ocean Territories are largely consistent with comparable remote populations in Australia that have ageing populations. The combination of remoteness, ageing populations, and low (on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands) and middle (on Christmas Island)



socioeconomic status is reflected in elevated health risk factors, including obesity, poor diet and physical inactivity, which contribute to the increased rates of chronic disease.

1.2.2 Facilities and services

Health facilities in the Indian Ocean Territories are more extensive than those in comparable small and remote locations, with more comprehensive primary care services being provided. Similar to comparable services, Christmas Island has a 24-hour health service and provides dental, physiotherapy, ultrasound, and X-ray services. Health facilities on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands are also more extensive than in comparable locations, and it is the only health service to provide mammography, ultrasound, X-ray and pathology services.

1.2.3 General Practitioner and specialist attendance rates

General Practitioner (GP) attendance per resident is lower than comparable communities and nationally, however appointments are longer for each patient. The specialist attendance rates for residents are slightly higher than the Australian average, and significantly higher than rates in comparable rural and remote areas.

1.2.4 Patient Assisted Travel Scheme and telehealth

The number of PATS trips is comparable to other regions after adjusting for population size. However, at \$3,600 per trip, the cost is more than eight times the average cost of a Western Australia Country Health Service PATS trip (at \$438). In 2018-19, there were 665 PATS trips.

There is significant potential to expand the use of telehealth services for specialist consultations and mental health services. This would provide a more timely service and reduce the number of PATS trips.

1.2.5 Governance and staffing arrangements

The Health Service's structure is broadly aligned with comparable services for medical, nursing and administrative functions. There is scope to reduce the number of GPs on Christmas Island from three to two. Changes are required to clarify roles and responsibilities and improve accountability.

1.3 Purpose of this report

The Department held consultations on the Report with the Christmas Island community from 13 to 16 May 2019 and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands community on 29 May, 18 and 20 September 2019. The Department met with a number of community groups and held open 'drop-in' sessions for community members.

This report summarises the views of these community groups and residents. Unless otherwise specified, the views expressed in this report are those of the community. These views will inform the development of the Five Year Strategic Plan for the Health Service.

Chapter 2: Community views on the PwC Report

2.1 Identified priority needs

Consultations on Christmas Island confirmed PwC's findings on the identified high priority needs of aged care, PATS policy and governance, and telehealth. The need to address drug and alcohol abuse, particularly by younger community members, was raised as a priority concern. There were mixed views on mental health.

2.2 24-hour services on Christmas Island

The consultations demonstrated strong support for maintaining 24-hour services on Christmas Island. However, there was some uncertainty about, and requests for clarification of, what '24-hour services' meant. In addition, some community members indicated that accessing the Health Service, particularly after hours, could be difficult. There was support for Option 4 in the PwC Report (maintain the 24-hour facility with reduced acute bed capacity, introduce an aged care facility for patients with high care needs on the Health Service site, and expand the Home and Community Care service).

2.3 Aged care

Views on aged care services were mixed on Christmas Island. Some groups expressed strong support for increasing aged care services, while others questioned the value of increased services due to Christmas Island's remoteness and the requirement of many elderly people for intensive medical services. Limited visibility of aged care services currently provided by the Health Service was apparent during consultations.

Mobility was viewed as a key challenge to increasing in-home services given the barriers to disability access in apartment housing on Christmas Island. It was noted some people have a preference for in-home care as this helps maintain independence. There was some support for expanding residential aged care attached to the Health Service.

2.4 Cancellation fee for appointments

Views on the introduction of a cancellation fee were mixed on Christmas Island. Those in favour felt that community members should attend booked appointments or pay a cancellation fee, as long as there was reasonable scope to waive the fee. Public awareness of the impacts of cancellations should be promoted prior to introducing a fee.

Those opposed to the proposal considered that some appointments are made at short notice, people can forget appointments, and that Health Service should send appointment reminders in line with some medical practices on mainland Australia. There were also queries about how a cancellation fee might be enforced.

2.5 Procedures room and maternity services on Christmas Island

Support for re-opening the operating theatre to allow childbirths on Christmas Island and other surgical procedures was expressed by some community members. These members felt an operating theatre could be cost-effective as visiting specialists would use the theatre, which could remove the need for PATS trips to Perth for certain procedures, reduce associated costs, and remove the need for patients to take annual leave. Community members also considered there was a 'social dimension' to the availability of maternity services on Christmas Island.

Conversely, some women indicated they would prefer to give birth in a metropolitan hospital in Perth that was fully equipped and staffed for maternity services, and therefore better able to respond to complications during childbirth, rather than risk giving birth on Christmas Island.

Noting community interest in an operating theatre, the Department raised the concept of a 'procedures room'. Community groups were generally receptive to this concept, which could treat certain low-level medical conditions, such as 'lumps and bumps' and some eye and orthopaedic conditions. The range of services a 'procedures room' could provide would be determined through further analysis of health needs, clinical standards requirements and community consultation.

2.6 Patient Assisted Travel Scheme

Key community concerns on Christmas Island around PATS focussed on transparency and cost. Some community members felt the PATS policy should be published to ensure transparency in the decision-making process and equal treatment of patients according to their medical needs. PATS was also viewed as expensive, and some community members requested publication of a breakdown of PATS expenditure. Pre-admission delays in Perth hospitals following PATS trips were also reported.

2.7 Telehealth

Community attitudes on Christmas Island to proposed increased telehealth services were generally positive. Some community members questioned how many in-person medical appointments would be replaced by telehealth appointments, and others queried the presence of medical staff in the telehealth room. The Department advised telehealth appointments would likely be used where limited in-person contact is required, such as pre- and post-operation consultations, and would not completely replace in-person consultations.

Some community members reported issues with existing telehealth services on Christmas Island. These included interruptions to internet services due to weather, extended periods of time between appointments and some duplication of work by telehealth doctors. The Department noted it is arranging a fibre-optic internet connection from the Australia-Singapore Vocus cable to the health service, which will significantly improve internet connectivity for telehealth and other services and remove weather-related disruptions.

2.8 Health Service public communications

While there was an appreciation for the high level of service provided, community groups on Christmas Island felt the Health Service could improve its communication with the community. This communication has two elements: health promotion activities and customer service.

Suggestions for improving health promotion activities included targeting existing messages to particular community groups to boost engagement, increasing public education and early intervention in relation to risk factors from health behaviours such as tobacco and alcohol use, safety education for tourists, and sharing information through non-medical community groups.

Concerns in relation to customer service included difficulties in getting appointments and miscommunication about scheduling of appointments, not receiving test results in a timely manner, poor language interpretation services, and challenges communicating with seniors who do not use technology or speak English.

2.9 Health Service staffing and governance

Some community members on Christmas Island saw the value in establishing an independent Board for the Health Service and they felt it would improve transparency and facilitate input from health experts who were more familiar with advances in governance in the medical sector. While there was recognition of the need for a Board to comprise experts, community members felt there should be community representation or a role for the community in its operation.


Some community members expressed concern at the use of temporary (locum) nurses and doctors as this could affect the continuity of medical care. Some also considered that these positions should be permanent. There was strong support for retention of the medical scientist position in light of perceived risks associated with mining operations, and some concern about PwC's recommendation to reduce the number of GPs from three to two.

Concerns were also raised about the perceived conflict of interest of Health Service staff in accessing medical records. There was a view that there should be more public education about how such access is monitored and controlled.

2.10 Addressing health behaviours

A number of community groups on Christmas Island expressed concerns at the low cost of alcohol and tobacco and the resulting health impacts and anti-social behaviour. Some community members voiced support for increasing taxes on alcohol and tobacco products to discourage smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, with proceeds of such a tax being returned to the community where possible. Increasing enforcement against public drinking and smoking to reduce social acceptance of these behaviours was also suggested.

Another suggestion was to introduce a subsidy for fresh food. Supportive community members felt these arrangements could help people choose healthier food as, at present, unhealthy food is purchased because it is cheaper.



Some concerns were raised about drug abuse on Christmas Island, particularly methamphetamines. Community members encouraged distribution of information about drug abuse, and creation of a dedicated, anonymous service for drug and alcohol rehabilitation to treat substance abuse as a medical issue. Confidentiality challenges were raised as an impediment to establishing support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, in small communities like Christmas Island.

On the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, community members noted that recent drug-related arrests have brought more attention to drug abuse issues.

2.11 Addressing mental health challenges

Some community members felt mental health should be treated as a higher priority on Christmas Island while others disagreed. Those who considered it to be a higher priority felt that the remoteness of Christmas Island contributed to mental health challenges. A 'quiet space' facility was suggested as a potential option to assist those experiencing mental health issues.

2.12 General comments

Overall community members felt well served by the Health Service on Christmas Island. Some community members indicated a need to consider the impacts on the Health Service from increased tourism and economic activity in the future. Confusion around who to contact in an emergency and whether triple-zero worked on Christmas Island was also raised as a concern.



Chapter 3: Next steps

The Department is reviewing the findings of the PwC Report and the views of the Indian Ocean Territories communities. These findings and views will inform the development of a Five Year Strategic Plan for the Health Service. The Indian Ocean Territories communities will have an opportunity to provide input into the Strategic Plan before its finalisation. The Strategic Plan will guide the adaptation of the Health Service to meet changing community needs.