

C. Hospitals

In 1986, there were 1067 hospitals in Australia, of which 734, or 69%, are public (Government) hospitals. Of the 90,788 hospital beds available, some 77% are located in public hospitals.

As is evident from the above figures, public hospitals tend to be larger than their private counterparts. Additionally, the range of specialist services available tends to be broader, with many also operating as teaching hospitals. In general, Australia's public hospitals are thought to be amongst the world's finest, both in terms of facilities and expertise of their staff.

Responsibility for public hospitals is vested with each State and Territory, who have total control over the funding and expenditure of their hospitals. The Commonwealth Government's participation is limited to hospitals run by its Departments of Veterans' Affairs (10 hospitals) and Defence (3 small hospitals).

Federal and State government policies of cost containment, combined with the increasing cost of health care provision and the effects of major industrial disputes have placed enormous pressure on the public hospital system. Waiting lists for elective surgery have escalated to the point where delays of 12-18 months are commonplace, and existing physical and financial resources are simply inadequate to provide the standard of care, and in many cases, the equipment and facilities, required and expected by the community.

The private hospital sector, traditionally owned and/or managed by individuals or small groups of doctors, is also undergoing significant change. There is an increasing trend towards corporate ownership, and a continued rationalisation of hospitals, partly in response to increasing cost pressures and partly in order to achieve economies of scale in the provision of services.

D. Primary Health Care

There is agreement generally that care in the community is preferable to institutionalization, wherever possible. The difficult question arises over who should and will meet the responsibility for community care.

Australians make considerable use of their primary health care system with 78.5 percent visiting a general practitioner at least once in 1986 (information supplied by the Health Benefits Operations Branch of the Department of Community Services and Health). There were approximately 18,000 medical practitioners actively involved in providing those services. Consumers also seek assistance from a significant number of other primary health care providers. The ABS found, for example, that one in twelve consultations were with a chemist in a two week survey period in 1983.