

## Select Committee on Matters Relating to SA Pathology and SA Medical Imaging

### Health Consumers Alliance SA Submission

#### Health Consumers Alliance SA

Health Consumers Alliance of SA Inc (HCA) was established in 2002 as the peak health consumer organisation in South Australia as a direct result of grass roots community lobbying. We are a member-based, independent, not-for-profit organisation. We work with our members and supporters to achieve our vision: **Consumers at the centre of health in South Australia.**

Health consumers are people who use, or are potential users of health services, including their family and carers.

HCA's mission is to engage consumers and health services to achieve high quality, safe, consumer-centred care for all South Australians. We seek to promote and strengthen the voices, wellbeing, rights and leadership of health consumers. We advocate that consumer engagement policy and practice is embedded across the SA health care system.

We believe that consumer engagement results in better planning and policy-making. This leads to better health outcomes and community wellbeing.

HCA is currently part of a network of state/territory funded peak health consumer organisations that promote and facilitate consumer voice to the health systems across Australia.

#### HCA submission

As the peak health consumer group in this state, HCA is well placed to provide a consumer perspective on what really matters to South Australians who use the health system, including SA Pathology and SA Medical Imaging (SAMI) services.

This document provides an initial consumer perspective to the Committee's deliberations. It has been informed by:

- A consumer focus group comprising consumers and representatives experienced in safety, quality and governance in South Australian health services
- Ongoing advice from the HCA Consumer Advocates Network, a state-wide group of 200 consumers trained and supported to represent the views of their lived experience and community constituencies
- HCA's long-standing role in consumer representation in a wide range of health system inquiries and health service improvement activities.

- Our everyday work, which sees us interacting with consumers with lived experience and their representatives, and community leaders and representatives, regarding their needs, values and preferences in the delivery of safe, quality health care for all South Australians.

## Response to Terms of Reference

### (a) The importance of high standards of safety and quality in the provision of pathology and imaging services;

The people of South Australia have a right to expect high standards of safety and quality in the provision of pathology and imaging services. High levels of safety ensure that patients are exposed to minimal risk from over-testing or infection, and quality service provision ensures that pathology services are timely, accurate and communicated correctly. This ensures that patients can then access timely and appropriate treatment for health conditions they may be experiencing. Evidence suggests that consumer engagement in design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of health services promotes higher standards of safety and quality.<sup>1</sup>

### (b) The importance of timeliness in the provision of pathology and imaging services and the impact of delayed results on patient outcomes and the broader South Australian health system;

Consumers consider that timeliness in the provision of pathology and imaging services is imperative. Many medical decisions are based on pathology or imaging test results, so timely access to results can relieve stress and anxiety for patients who are found not to have serious conditions, and those who are diagnosed with conditions can be provided with timely access to appropriate treatments to reduce pain and suffering, improve their quality of life and potentially prevent deaths.

People who remain undiagnosed due to slow pathology processing can potentially be carrying contagious infections that put other members of the community at risk, they may be absent or unproductive at work, and could have other members of the family taking time out of work to care for them. This comes at a huge cost to the economy.

Country consumers understand that they have to travel to regional centres for many services, and report being very happy with many of the services that are provided. Some imaging tests, eg cardiac imaging can take up to a week to be reported on because of the high workload and insufficient number of appropriately skilled radiologists/clinicians to interpret the results in regional areas. Much of this work can be done remotely, so there should be no reason for country consumers to experience slower services than those living in metropolitan Adelaide.

Quick response to public health alerts such as food poisoning is also highly valued by consumers. SA Pathology is highly regarded for their expertise in this area. If this area of services was to be made contestable, it would be unlikely to bring about savings as private providers would need to recruit the expertise and focus on making a profit. The tendering system itself also comes as an additional cost.

(c) The importance of South Australian-based research and teaching associated with pathology and imaging services;

SA Pathology and SAMI have had a long history of working with South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI) and the university sector and in partnership with South Australian hospitals and clinicians to deliver effective research that has resulted in many new and improved treatments and cures that have changed or saved the lives of many people. These research partnerships have developed over many years with very clear understandings of the protocols used by SA Pathology and SAMI that are embedded into the research ethics approvals. Health consumers are increasingly involved in the research sector in South Australia, not only as research subjects, but as stakeholders who influence the design and delivery of research. Consumers, particularly those with a history of cancer are very passionate about the importance of local research, as it can be vital to their survival. South Australian consumers have a right to access research trials in their home state, and SA Pathology and SAMI play a vital and unique role in delivering this.

(d) The importance of access to pathology and medical imaging services in primary health, including the role of SA Pathology and SA Medical Imaging in ensuring accessibility of health care and the provision of bulk-billed services;

HCA and local health consumers have welcomed the government's renewed focus on wellbeing through improved/increased primary and preventive health strategies and services. Consumers consider that pathology and medical imaging services are integral to prevention, early intervention and keeping South Australian's healthy for longer.

If SA Pathology and SAMI makes decisions based on profitability rather than access to quality services, or if private providers have greater prominence in the market, then bulk billing could be at risk. If consumers are required to pay for pathology services, then many will put off getting tests until they are very unwell. Given the correlation between lower socio-economic communities and higher rates of chronic disease, it would be easy to predict worsening health outcomes in those communities if bulk billing of pathology and imaging services was no longer available.

Access to pathology and medical imaging services through a General Practitioner who can then provide appropriate treatment and referral is important for preventing people from becoming more unwell and attending the emergency department (ED). Already we have people attending EDs because their GP does not bulk bill, so they choose to attend an ED where they can access free medical assistance. If pathology and imaging services are not accessible without charge, more people will attend EDs in the hope that they will access those services for free.

(e) The former Labor Government’s Enterprise Pathology Laboratory Information System and its implementation, including the impact on staff, the quality of service provision, patient outcomes, teaching and research;

Consumers expect pathology services to have an electronic processing and records system. They expect the system to be efficient and easy for staff to use, and they expect the system to work effectively with the electronic medical records system used in the health service (currently EPAS). They also expect the electronic system to work effectively with My Health Record, and to gain timely access to their own records. Introduction of new systems always takes time, as staff to get used to new ways of working. Staff need training, which takes time, and there needs to be understanding that they may initially be less efficient until they become proficient at using the new system. Additional resources need to be allocated to the health system during these change periods to ensure that the health and safety of consumers is not compromised.

(f) The impact of the 2018 State Budget in regard to SA Pathology and SA Medical Imaging, including the impact on staff, the quality of service provision, patient outcomes, teaching and research;

The following is a list of valued aspects of SA Pathology and SA Imaging services:

- Quick and skilled response to public health alerts
- Quick processing and access to pathology and imaging results
- Highly skilled clinicians and technicians able to process and report on complex conditions
- Training of pathologists and radiologists and education of GPs and other health professionals
- Engagement in research partnerships
- Bulk billing of all services
- Provision of services to rural and remote communities
- Almost all pathology processing is done in SA
- Storage of consumers health data in Australia

If any of these functions are negatively impacted by the 2018 State Budget, then there would be an adverse impact on consumers.

(g) The effects of potential privatisation of SA Pathology and SA Medical Imaging as foreshadowed in the 2018 State Budget, including the impact on staff, the quality of service provision, patient outcomes, teaching and research; and

At the HCA’s consumer forum on SA Pathology, consumers asked SA Pathology staff about funding models – how it works, which aspects of their business is lucrative, and which aspects are not. Teaching, research and provision of services in rural and remote areas of South Australia were reported as not being lucrative. These are also parts of SA Pathology’s function that are vital to consumers that private providers have shown little or no interest in.

If SA Pathology or SAMI were to be privatised and therefore make decisions based on profit, then rural and regional South Australian’s health would suffer enormously, the health and medical research sector, for which South Australia is highly respected, would lose vital research partners and expertise, and opportunities for pathologist or radiologist training in South Australia would dwindle, eventually leading

to a loss of expertise in this state. These are all functions that health consumers (who are also taxpayers) believe are good investments of our tax dollars.

#### (h) Any other related matters.

During the focus group, consumers learnt that the Medicare funding model is sufficient to run effective pathology services, but rather than funding each individual pathology test, Medicare funds the three most expensive tests requested, and the pathology service is expected to provide all other tests within that fee. If a person is having seven different tests, the pathology service will only be funded for 3 and process the remaining 4 tests for no additional income. Consumers were informed that private providers often process only the first 3 funded tests and pass any remaining tests on to SA Pathology to process for no income. Consumers consider this to be very unfair. If a private pathology service agrees to process pathology testing for an individual, they should do all the processing. Consumers using private providers have not consented to having their pathology samples sent to any other provider, so this is also considered to be a breach of privacy. In no other business sector is it considered acceptable for private businesses to dump unfunded work on a government agency. This practice should be stopped, resulting in improved financial viability of SA Pathology.

Health consumers want accessible, effective, efficient, high quality pathology and medical imaging services. We believe that there could be some efficiencies achieved through resource and knowledge sharing with other public services across Australia, and through banning private providers from dumping unfunded work on SA Pathology. The bottom line though, is that we believe it is important, and a good investment of taxpayer funds, to retain a publicly funded pathology and medical imaging services. The risks to the rest of the health system and to the health of South Australians of privatising SA Pathology or SAMI is not justifiable.

## Recommendations

HCA recommends that:

SA Pathology and SAMI are retained as public services.

Bulk billing of SA Pathology and SAMI services is retained.

Private providers are prevented from dumping unfunded work on SA Pathology.

Involvement in research and training, and the provision of services in rural and regional Australia are seen as investments in the health of South Australians and are removed from financial modelling that might compare SA Pathology and SAMI to private providers who do not make those investments.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://chf.org.au/publications/shifting-gears-consumers-transforming-health>