



ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

# MEDIA RELEASE

## Surgeons assess responses of major political parties

Wednesday 18 August, 2010

Having compared and assessed the responses of the two major political parties to its 2010 Federal Election manifesto, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons has concluded that while both parties have addressed some of the challenges facing Australia's health system, both still have a long way to go before the needs of Australia's patients are adequately met. With just three days to polling day, Australians are now well placed to consider the Government's and Opposition's policies in the key areas of:

- the future surgical workforce;
- patient safety;
- surgical services in regional and rural Australia;
- access to care; and
- funding.

The response provided by the Labor Party's National Campaign Headquarters was understandably focussed on the recent past, outlining funding commitments and reforms announced during the Government's first term in office.

While the College acknowledges this commitment to reform, it is concerned that these announced reforms still lack the detail that clinicians have been seeking for most of 2010. For example, Labor's undertaking to "draw on the private sector to expand overall capacity for specialist training" is a welcome but very vague commitment. Similarly, a promise to give priority to rural and regional Australia in specialist training programs needs greater detail if it is to be truly credible.

The Government's previously announced commitment to more than double the current number of specialist training rotations by 2014 is to be commended.

While the Government claims to be committed to improved assessment processes for new health technologies, which are fundamental to patient safety, it is still to commit to the ongoing and sustainable funding of the Australian Safety and Efficacy Register of New Interventional Procedures – Surgical (ASERNIP-S). This register, in place for 12 years, provides evidence based evaluation of new surgical techniques and is ideally placed to ensure that the taxpayers' healthcare dollar is spent in the safest and most effective manner.

It must also be noted that many specific proposals raised in the College's manifesto were ignored in the Labor Government's response.

Finally the College dismisses Labor's assertion that by handing the federal government responsibility for 60 per cent of health funding, it will somehow "help end the blame game". This is not credible. Until such time as one level of government funds 100 per cent of the health system – that is, a single funder model is in place – governments will continue to blame each other.

The response from the Opposition was frankly disappointing, with a recycled piece of direct mail serving as a covering letter from Coalition Campaign Headquarters, and five health related policy documents masquerading as a response to the specific issues raised in the College manifesto.

Having said that, there are some initiatives of interest in these policies, including a commitment to 2,800 new beds over the next four years. The College has long called for more beds in our public hospitals and deplores the anti-bed bias of some in the health bureaucracy.

The Coalition's commitment to community controlled public hospitals is also applauded by the College, which fears that Labor's Local Health Networks will prove another level of bureaucracy far removed from the coalface of our hospitals. The Coalition's proposed hospital boards are more likely to understand and meet the day to day needs of the hospital's patients and staff and, crucially, are more likely to involve clinician input. The Coalition should commit more explicitly to the vital matter of clinician involvement in hospitals' decision making processes.

While the Coalition's commitment to casemix funding is welcomed, it raises the attendant question about the future of smaller rural hospitals which are less busy but provide a vital service to local communities.

A Coalition proposal to help fund an information and compliance campaign to improve rates of Informed Financial Consent is also something the College would support.

The Coalition's commitment to improved mental health services is also welcome. This will at last address the needs of some of our community's most desperate people while freeing up beds in our public health system inappropriately occupied by the mentally ill.

College Vice President Mr Keith Mutimer said there were proposals of interest in both responses to the College's manifesto and urged Australians and Fellows of the College of Surgeon in particular, to take the time to read the documents.

"The responses paint a broad picture of the future of Australia's health system. There are similarities in these views and there are some key differences. I urge people to look at them both," he said.

"While we are disappointed that neither party responded in detail to the specifics of our manifesto, the College has at least flagged the issues it considers central to the ongoing sustainability of the Australian health system and will pursue these in detail with whichever party forms government on Sunday morning. We also sent the manifesto to those MPs seeking re-election and to all Senators – this will help ensure the College's views are known to key decision makers."

Mr Mutimer thanked both parties for responding to the College's questions, which are publicly available on the College website: [www.surgeons.org](http://www.surgeons.org)

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