

MEDIA RELEASE

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Transcript: Catholic Health Australia CEO on ABC Radio's AM Program 5/3/10

TONY EASTLEY: The Prime Minister's daily schedule is turning into what looks like a rolling tour of the nation's hospitals. Yesterday he was at Brisbane and today he's in Sydney.

Kevin Rudd wants his hospital funding plan to remain very much front and centre. Health experts say even if support is forthcoming for it, it could be years before any benefits are felt.

But one big health organisation says the Prime Minister's promise to treat elective surgery patients in private hospitals if they have to wait too long in the public system could be put into effect straight away.

The head of Catholic Health Australia, Martin Laverty, spoke with Samantha Hawley.

MARTIN LAVERTY: There's at present 89,000 people who have been waiting longer than the clinically appropriate time for their surgery and there is the option today of using private hospital beds to treat a large number of those people. You don't have to wait.

It might take three or more years for state premiers to agree on this new governance arrangement. Tomorrow the Prime Minister could provide the funds to use available private hospital beds to treat patients seeking elective surgery without too much fuss and bother.

SAMANTHA HAWLEY: Does the private sector now have the capacity to treat 89,000 public patients?

MARTIN LAVERTY: At the moment public hospitals around Australia are operating at about 87 per cent capacity. Experts say that when a public hospital reaches 85 it's full. In comparison, private hospitals are only operating at about 77 per cent capacity. That means that they have available beds to treat public patients that have been waiting for their elective surgery.

SAMANTHA HAWLEY: And where would the money for that come from?

MARTIN LAVERTY: Well we've proposed to the Government that treating the 89,000 people would cost about \$450 million. Now immediately that sounds expensive but consider \$450 million in the context of the broader health budget and it's actually not a lot of money.

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SAMANTHA HAWLEY: Why would people pay for private health insurance if the feds were going to pay for that anyway? Won't we see a mass exodus from the private health insurance system?

MARTIN LAVERTY: Well that just doesn't seem rational because there is always going to be a robust private health market within Australia. It is certainly the case that those that have the capacity to pay are going to want to contribute to their insurance that allows them access to private health.

SAMANTHA HAWLEY: Even when that insurance is going up rapidly, as we see this year twice the rate of CPI (consumer price index)?

MARTIN LAVERTY: Because those who pay into private health insurance value the service that they receive from private hospitals.

TONY EASTLEY: Catholic Health Australia's CEO Martin Laverty speaking to Samantha Hawley.