

Open letter to Verity Firth, MP for Balmain

Listen to your electors, show some humanity, re-open Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital in Callan Park

Dear Verity Firth,

You have supported the closing of Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital despite the appalling crisis in mental health that is exposed almost every day in the media. Nurses at the Prince of Wales hospital, for instance, have had to take industrial action recently to draw attention to the inadequate number of beds for mental health patients. This was happening a fortnight after the closing of the Rozelle hospital with its 210 beds (the smaller and relatively inaccessible Concord mental health wing is scarcely an adequate replacement).

And you have supported the hospital's closure despite the fact that the majority of your electors oppose this – surveys commissioned by Leichhardt Council show over 70% support the retention of Rozelle hospital in Callan Park.

Citizens know the consequences of this shutdown. People with a mental illness need ready access to modern, humane hospital treatment. Too often – because of the shortage of beds - they find themselves ejected before they are well, then they find themselves homeless or are destined to be locked up in jail, or become a burden on their families. Even worse, in desperation, they take their lives – the rate of suicide among mental health patients has risen dramatically since the rundown in our hospitals over the past two decades. (Reports from the NSW Sentinel Event Review Commission, an official body made up of experts in this field, reveal that up to two thirds of these deaths – we are talking about hundreds of lives – could have been saved by a system with more beds and better community care.)

Your electors know that Callan Park – so beautiful and so tranquil - is an ideal place for mental health treatment, for recovery, rehabilitation and respite. This has been confirmed by research available on the website of NSW Health itself.

In your defence you cite the promise by the state 'Labor' government to open 300 new mental health beds across the state in the next four years. But that will only bring the number of such beds in NSW back to their 1993 level. There were

not enough beds then and besides the population of the state has increased by 700,000 since 1993.

You raise too the much trumpeted commitment to mental health of the Premier Morris Iemma. Yet between 2003 and 2005 the number of mental health staff in NSW dropped from 86 per 100,000 to 83. This was the very time when Mr Iemma was Minister for Health – scarcely a record that inspires much confidence. The national average, by the way, is 93. (*See the latest National Mental Health report, issued by the federal government, page 139*)

This lack of staff undermines both the hospital and community support sectors in mental health. Closing Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital has made this worse – we hear reports of disillusioned staff leaving the system because of this closure.

Finally you boast of an 11% increase – 7% if inflation is taken into account - in spending on mental health in the last state budget. Because NSW is the worse state in providing decent mental health services, this is scarcely enough. On the subject of money, we draw your attention to the fact that is cheaper and quicker to re-commission and renovate the 1990s, and even 1960s, buildings at Callan Park than build new ones.

It is practical to re-open this hospital. The grounds and the buildings (some built in the 1990s) remain. Public support for this would be assured. All that is needed is a local Member of Parliament willing to fight for what is right and what her electors support. (And it is a far preferable course of action than supporting Frank Sartor's plan to give Callan Park to the University of Sydney and developers to build a huge campus of six-storey buildings for 5000-10,000 students.)

Please think again on this issue. Lives depend on it.

Letter from the Herald ...

I wept when I read your article "Nurses place work ban on mental health patients" (May 14). All the memories of my experiences with my late daughter came flooding back: the hours we would sit in emergency at Prince of Wales, the pressure placed on the staff, who always tried their best for us, but whose hands were tied because for the most part there were never any beds.

The Government has now chosen to shut Rozelle psychiatric hospital, knowing full well this will only magnify the problems. Concord Hospital cannot, and does not, replace Rozelle.

Why are patients at Royal North Shore and Prince of Wales sedated and tied down like animals because of bed shortages? Inquiries in 2002 and 2005 showed what was needed, and yet eyes are shut and ears closed.

My daughter committed suicide two years ago, and when I read of the daily struggles that are still faced by those like her, I say to myself, "Thank God she doesn't have to endure this any longer." My heart goes out to the unsung heroes, the nurses and doctors who work in the mental health system, who are to be cherished and should not be made to suffer as they are now.

Dianne Gaddin Neutral Bay

Yours faithfully

Friends of Callan Park

P.S. We have attached a copy of a very relevant letter published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday, May 15.

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