

MEDIA RELEASE

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UPPER CLUTHA'S HEALTHCARE CRISIS: REPORT UNVEILS URGENT NEEDS

Significant unmet needs, systemic barriers, and a lack of strategic health planning are the main themes of a major report into the health needs of the Upper Clutha community released today.

The research findings are contained in a report titled, 'Perception versus reality: the true state of healthcare in the Upper Clutha' undertaken by advocacy group Health Action Wānaka. The findings are the result of consultation with more than 300 members of the Upper Clutha community and health system stakeholders.

Health Action Wānaka spokesperson Monique Mayze said the healthcare inequity in the Upper Clutha was indefensible.

"Despite Wānaka's population being projected to grow at a rate of 144% by 2053, and the Upper Clutha being one of the country's fastest-growing communities, we have been left behind when it comes to investment in healthcare.

"We are at least an hour from an emergency department over the country's highest main road, and around 275km from a large specialist hospital.

"Listening to people's stories, it's clear that they face too many barriers in accessing the healthcare they need, despite the best efforts of our local healthcare providers."

During its research, the group learned that:

- People are paying for after-hours acute care that is free for people living in other parts of the country.
- Residents of the Upper Clutha (pop. 17,000) have paid up to \$800 over three years for blood collection, a service that is publicly funded (free) in most places in New Zealand, including smaller towns such as Balclutha (pop. 4340), Clyde (pop. 1260) and Gore (pop. 8240).
- Parents seeking mental health support for children and youth, especially those under 12 with mild to moderate mental health needs are struggling to access services.
- Elderly residents are being transferred out of Wānaka to Dunedin, Christchurch, Invercargill and Gore due to a lack of local facilities and services to support them as their needs increase.
- People are being refused clinically necessary radiology and specialist care due to high numbers of referral rejections. There was a 54% rejection rate for GP referrals to specialist care in the southern health region — the highest in the country in 2022.
- Some elderly people are prepared to lose their eyesight rather than travel to Dunedin for treatment for eye disease.
- Pregnant people are frustrated at having to travel to Dunedin for specialist consultations, epidural access and c-section services, and relying on helicopter evacuations if complications arise if birthing locally.

- Residents and healthcare providers are concerned about the risk of being unable to transport critically ill patients by helicopter due to the weather.
- Local residents are travelling seven hours or more to attend 15-minute appointments for services that should be available locally.
- Residents of the Upper Clutha can travel 2750 km to visit Dunedin Hospital five times in six months and still not be eligible for reimbursement from the National Travel Assistance scheme.
- Healthcare providers are trying to deliver primary care with insufficient funding to meet service costs in a rural setting.
- The community is struggling to support a local healthcare workforce due to the high cost of living and lack of affordable housing.

The group has identified three 'quick wins' to help alleviate the Upper Clutha's healthcare inequity and is asking Minister of Health Simeon Brown to commit to making them happen.

They are: the introduction of psychiatric consultations via telehealth within twelve months, delivery of a publicly funded blood collection service in Wānaka within two years, and increased local access to publicly funded radiology services via the government's \$30m funding boost announced last June.

"The three 'quick wins' we are seeking are entirely doable and will go a long way to addressing the inequity our community has faced for way too long," Mayze said.

"We are calling on the Minister of Health Simeon Brown and the Prime Minister Christopher Luxon to listen to our community and to work with us to address the inequity we face."

The group also wants to partner with local community organisations and service providers to raise funds to implement the following community initiatives:

- **Establishment of a local health navigator role** to support patients with chronic and/or complex cases to navigate the health system.
- **Development of local capability** to deliver selected specialist-level services such as the administering of Avastin injections for eye disease.
- **Delivery of community care programmes** to support and engage community members with dementia, disabilities, and chronic conditions, and to provide respite for their carers.
- Provision of **additional rooms in Wānaka** for healthcare and service providers to deliver their services locally.

The group says the findings from its research will form the basis of its future advocacy.

The full report can be read on the HAW website at: healthactionwanaka.nz/resources

For more information, please contact Health Action Wānaka Chair Monique Mayze on 027 956 5522 or email: info@healthactionwanaka.nz

About Health Action Wānaka

Health Action Wānaka is a community-led advocacy group committed to achieving equitable access to health services for the Upper Clutha community. The group was formed in March 2024 following a community meeting hosted by the Wānaka Upper Clutha Community Board. The meeting featured a panel of experts who provided insights into the state of healthcare in the Upper Clutha and discussed avenues for improvement. Health Action Wānaka is led by a steering committee of volunteers. Its objectives are listed on its website: healthactionwanaka.nz