

No emergency care Penguin intruder warning

Cash-strapped hospital shuts after-hours service

COLAC
By **SEAN MCCOMISH**

PATIENTS in the Colac area needing emergency medical treatment will be forced to either Warrnambool or Geelong from next month.

Colac hospital's after-hours emergency department will shut from February 1 with Colac Area Health blaming federal government funding cuts for the drastic move.

It means ambulances that would have taken patients to the Colac hospital will now take emergency cases direct to either Barwon Health in Geelong or Warrnambool

Base Hospital. The decision has sparked a blame game between political opponents in Corangamite over who should pay to keep the unit open.

While the urgent care service at Colac is not a formally funded emergency department, on-call GPs had been available to see patients with pressing needs.

Last year, Colac Area Health (CAH) chief executive officer Geoff Iles warned the service would need to fill a \$255,000 black hole in its books after the federal government sliced \$107 million from its health funding to Victoria.

On Friday he delivered

the news to staff that the unit would shut its doors from February 1.

"The last thing we want to do is reduce the health services that we provide to the community, particularly as we operate in a regional area," Mr Iles said. "However, the funding reduction of \$255,000 this financial year has left us with no choice."

Fewer than five people use the service a night, with only one serious category 1 emergency case presenting every couple of months. The community is now being told to make plans for a medical emergency in a similar way

to a bushfire plan.

"We carefully considered every possible option for reducing our operating costs, but at the end of the day the only option was to close the service that would cause the least negative impact on the community and on our staff," Mr Iles said.

But the move has become a localised brawl between the federal and state governments over health funding.

Member for Corangamite Darren Cheeseman launched a petition targeting the state for \$600 million health cuts made in the last federal budget, while the Liberal

candidate for Corangamite Sarah Henderson has her own petition calling on federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek to reinstate the hospital's funding.

"Colac Area Health CEO, Geoff Iles, has made it clear that if these funds are reinstated the hospital's overnight urgent care service will be re-opened," Ms Henderson said.

Mr Iles was in no doubt as to where the blame lay: "It's very clear that the \$255,000 we needed to find was directly related to the decision by the federal government."

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WARRNAMBOOL
By **MATTHEW O'TOOLE**

THE removal of trespassers on Middle Island by police last week has prompted a "stay off" warning from the Warrnambool City Council.

Police were called to the protected home of Warrnambool's little penguin colony on Sunday, January 13 after reports of trespassers on the island. Sergeant Sean Halley confirmed that two people were found on the island interfering with the maramma guard dogs.

Members of the public have been banned from the island — home to a colony of about 170 little penguins — since 2006 and anyone caught interfering with either the guard dogs or penguins faces a penalty of \$282.

Warrnambool City Council environment officer Paul Hartrick said the offence was disappointing and came just weeks after penguin nesting boxes were destroyed by vandals.

"Members of the public are not permitted on the island except during guided tours, which is for their own safety as well as that of the penguins and the marammas," Mr Hartrick said.

"Having people on the island can be disruptive to the penguin's breeding patterns. It's important people are aware the marammas are working dogs and have an important job to do in protecting the penguin colony from foxes and other dogs."

Instead, Mr Hartrick is encouraging people to log on to the island's "penguin cam" system (www.coastalwatch.com/news/article.aspx?articleId=11094) where up to three cameras stream live vision from breeding boxes on the island.

"So far we've found the penguin camera program to be great and is a real connection to the community."

"At the moment we have two cameras that are streaming 24/7 except for on extreme hot days. In one box we've got an adult and a three to four-week-old chick and in another box we have two seven-week-old chicks."

What do you mean you can't play. Of course uke can

PORT FAIRY
By **MATTHEW O'TOOLE**

AN aspiring group of ukulele players rocked out at the summer Moyneyana Festival in Port Fairy yesterday.

Ukulele player extraordinaire Thom Jackson held Uke'n'Play ukulele classes on the Village Green yesterday and Sunday.

"We start out just teaching some basic chords and the goal is getting everyone to play, especially those that thought that they could never play music," Mr Jackson said.

"We had about 30 to 40 people get involved today and we had a few more yesterday but everyone really got involved."

Mr Jackson has played and taught the ukulele for about 11 years and says he still gets a kick every time he manages to get someone to pick up the tiny Hawaiian instrument.

"I really want people to know the joy of the ukulele."

"There was one boy who had to be about seven who was trying to teach his grandmother how to play and where to put her hands."

"That was pretty



Port Fairy's Paulaida Fitzsimmons joins in the Uke'n'Play ukulele session with six-year-old son Jonah and five-month-old daughter Annika on the Port Fairy Village Green yesterday.

130121LP09 Picture: LEANNE PICKETT

awesome to see."

This year also saw Mr Jackson perform for the first time in a solo

children's concert — another memorable experience, he said. "We had about 60 kids there and most of

them were getting up and dancing which was pretty awesome to see."

Mr Jackson said he

cannot wait to come back next year.

"I'll definitely be back — you know, if they let me."

Big opportunity for small-town artists

REGION
By **MATT NEAL**

ARTISTS from small towns who want to transform the creative identity of their local community can attend information sessions at Camperdown and Port Fairy today.

Regional Arts Victoria's Small Town Transformations program aims to celebrate the ideas, creativity and resourcefulness in Victoria's littlest communities, asking residents to envisage how the arts can effect change, improve infrastructure and opportunities and help realise local aspirations.

The program will fund creative projects from small towns of less than 1500 people, with up to \$350,000 available for five projects across the state, each involving strong community support and participation.

Expressions of interest opened on January 14 and applicants based in small towns can learn more at today's sessions.

Camperdown's session begins at 10.30am at the Camperdown Court House, with a 3.30pm session at the Port Fairy Community Services Centre. For more information visit <http://smalltowns.rav.net.au>

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