

Urgent public forum

Hospital crisis fears

COLAC
By SEAN MCCOMISH

HUNDREDS of worried residents are expected to turn out at a public forum tonight over the closure of overnight urgent care at the Colac hospital.

Colac Area Health (CAH) board members, political opponents, councillors and emergency services will be among the audience as the public seek answers over why the town will be without an emergency department overnight.

The meeting comes after CAH also announced that it would close six beds to cover a \$1-million-dollar deficit.

CAH chief executive Geoff Iles will face members of the public who are likely to ask why another alternative was not chosen.

The unit will close from 10pm until 7am under changes to kick in on February 1, leaving just one ambulance on duty to take patients to Geelong.

The information session has also pulled in a swag of politicians, eager to point the fingers.

State member for Polwarth Terry Mulder and federal member for Corangamite Darren Cheeseman will be there. Liberal candidate Sarah Henderson and Greens Senator Richard Di Natale are also believed to be attending.

Colac Otway Shire mayor Lyn Russell, who will chair the forum, said she hoped a political bun fight could be avoided.

"From the feedback I'm getting, the public are sick of the blame game and they want some answers," Cr Russell said.

"They're hoping to hear if there are any alternative options or if there are any

long-term solutions over the hospital debt."

Cr Russell said last week's announcement of the closure of six beds had come as another blow to the community still reeling from the urgent care cutbacks.

"It's made people more anxious than they already were."

Over the past week, the mayor said she had been inundated with emails and phone calls and had been stopped in the street by worried residents.

Tonight's forum has been organised by CAH and Colac mother Laura Cook, whose Facebook page calling on the unit to stay open around the clock is nearing a thousand likes.

"People are outraged that this decision has been made," Ms Cook said.

"People are going to ask questions about their own experiences — like what am I going to do if my mother who has diabetes goes into shock?"

Ms Cook — who has two children under the age of three said she was concerned over where she could take her children overnight if something went wrong.

The decision to cut the unit hours overnight came after the Commonwealth pulled \$255,000 from the service as part of the \$107 million Victorian health cuts. The Victorian government has called for the funds to be reinstated.

Federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek will discuss the cuts with Victorian Health Minister David Davis at a meeting in Melbourne later this week.

Tonight's forum will be held at the Colac Otway Performing Arts & Cultural Centre from 7pm.

s.mccomish@fairfaxmedia.com.au



Warrnambool Medical Clinic practice manager Alistair Ross (left), Dr John Philpot, ASPREE clinical research nurse Julie Battistello and Dr Bernie Oppermann have been recognised for their work in an aspirin research project.

An aspirin a day may keep illness at bay

WARRNAMBOOL
By MATTHEW O'TOOLE

A WARRNAMBOOL health clinic has been recognised for its participation in a medical study that could have implications for the treatment and prevention of disease worldwide.

The Warrnambool Medical Clinic was recognised by the organisers of the ASPREE (ASpirin in Reducing Events in the Elderly) for their extensive involvement in the five-year study into the health benefits of aspirin.

The Monash University study hopes to shed some light on whether taking

aspirin can prevent or stop diseases common to the elderly such as heart attacks, dementia, certain types of strokes, some forms of cancer and whether it helps maintain good health in people aged over 70.

About 16,000 Australians will eventually be involved in the five-year study.

There is another 3000 participants in America — half taking aspirin daily and the rest a placebo with yearly health checks.

The ASPREE regional director for the area Mark Johnstone said he was excited that clinics such as the Warrnambool Medical

Clinic were involved in the study. "We are very appreciative that participants and GPs in the south-west community have embraced this very important public good study," Mr Johnstone said. "We have around 450 people in the region on the study, with around 75 coming from this clinic alone."

The study has been running for about 18 months at some clinics and after three years, an interim report on findings will be compiled.

Senior Warrnambool Medical Clinic general practitioner Dr John Philpot said he was excited

that a study of this size and calibre had allowed the clinic to be involved.

"We've never participated in a research study like this before in general practice and it is good that general practice can be involved in medical research which used to be mainly based in hospitals," Dr Philpot said.

"It's a different group of patients out there that can participate in research now, not just a group of people that have been in hospital for a host of illnesses."

"It's really looking at the healthy population and seeing how we can keep them healthier for longer."

Slow down near schools, drivers told

REGION

THOUSANDS of school students will head back to class this week prompting a warning by authorities for motorists to slow down.

As of today, 40km/h zones will be enforced on busy morning and afternoon roads near schools.

Recently, Warrnambool City Council successfully applied to VicRoads to fund an extra crossing guard on Jamieson Street after carrying out a traffic count last year.

More than 4886 vehicles were travelling on Jamieson Street each day with up to 800 vehicles an hour during peak times.

The council's technical service manager Rohan McKinnon said the new crossing guard would be welcomed by parents from St Joseph's and Warrnambool primary schools, who raised concerns about the safety of Jamieson Street.

"Initially we installed a pedestrian refuge in the area

to improve the ability to cross, but as traffic counts and the number of students crossing the road increased, we've had a stronger case for funding a supervised crossing," Mr McKinnon said.

The move is also hoped to encourage more parents to allow their children to walk to school.

Wave power just one step away

PORT FAIRY
By SEAN MCCOMISH

PLANS for a \$15 million wave energy project off the Port Fairy coastline need just one more green light before work can get under way.

Sydney-based developer BioPower has received a Moyne Shire planning permit and consent by the Department of Environment and Sustainability (DSE) bringing construction a step closer.

The public will get a chance to see blueprints and have their questions answered at a public forum on March 21 in Port Fairy.

BioPower chief executive Tim Finnigan said a DSE licence was

still required before work could start at the site four kilometres west of the town at the abalone mariculture facility.

"We anticipate to have that in the first half of this year," Dr Finnigan said.

"At the public session, we'll show the layout of the unit itself." He said the company hoped to install the 40-metre-high underwater grid next summer.

The project has also been given the environmental tick by impact statements. "Most of this year will be spent on the procurement of the equipment — a major part of that is the fabrication of the steel structure." Once commissioned, the project

will have a 21-month lifespan to see if power can be commercially gathered from the ocean.

"The aim of the trial is to test the technology itself and to see if can extract energy from ocean waves."

"We don't have any plans to expand further in the area."

Dr Finnigan said the public forum would cover the roll-out of works and the size of an electrical cable connecting the underwater machinery to land.

"The exact location of that we're still working out," he said.

An information session will be held at Charlies on East Beach on March 21 at 7pm.

s.mccomish@fairfaxmedia.com.au

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