

# War of wards as bed shortage crisis 'critical'

## PATIENTS PRESENTING TO THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT WITH A VISIT TIME EQUAL OR GREATER THAN 24 HOURS

| SITE         | 2017-18     | 2018-19     | 2019-20     | 2020-21     | 2021-22     | 2022-23     |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| RAH          | 1572        | 2001        | 1708        | 1803        | 2444        | 3886        |
| QEH          | 542         | 725         | 689         | 525         | 767         | 791         |
| FMC          | 215         | 495         | 516         | 1091        | 1935        | 2020        |
| Noarlunga    | 162         | 180         | 341         | 176         | 268         | 630         |
| LMH          | 61          | 421         | 374         | 245         | 290         | 823         |
| Modbury      | 102         | 138         | 220         | 225         | 426         | 691         |
| WCH          | 1           | 0           | 4           | 0           | 1           | 1           |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>2655</b> | <b>3960</b> | <b>3852</b> | <b>4065</b> | <b>6131</b> | <b>8842</b> |

Source: SA Health. Includes patients who died, did not wait to be seen, or left at their own risk before treatment was complete.



“Our hospitals and health system should never have reached this crisis point”

**Bernadette Mulholland**  
Salaried Medical Officers spokeswoman



Doctors and paramedics attending a hospital emergency and Salaried Medical Officers industrial chief Bernadette Mulholland, inset.

### Brad Crouch

Almost 9000 patients were forced to wait more than 24 hours in metropolitan public hospital emergency departments for a ward bed last financial, alarming new figures show.

Patients lost in the limbo of clogged EDs have spiralled to an average of 24 every day, waiting more than a day for a ward place – up from seven a day five years ago.

Data obtained by the Sunday Mail shows patient numbers in EDs for 24 hours or more tripled from 2655 in 2017-18 to 8843 in 2022-23.

This period included two changes of state governments, the opening of the \$2.4bn Royal Adelaide Hospital and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Patients stuck in EDs led to record ambulance ramping rates as new arrivals were

forced to wait with paramedics in car parks.

Ramping jumped to 3354 hours lost in car parks in July, up from 3105 in June, despite the government's pre-election promise to “fix” ramping.

The figures showed that some patients, many with mental health issues, had to wait several days in ED until a suitable bed was found.

In a positive sign, the 4124 patients stuck in EDs for more than 24 hours in January-June 2023, was a drop compared to the record 4718 patients in the previous six months.

However, this was almost double the number in the same period two years earlier.

SA Salaried Medical Officers Association chief industrial officer Bernadette Mulholland said clinicians were feeling “crushed” by a system that has needed attention for years.

“Our hospitals and health system should never have reached this crisis point, lack of workforce and bed planning over years by health administrators and successive governments placed the SA community's health at significant risk,” she said.

“There is still enormous pressure on doctors in our hospitals to meet patient demand, and although there is a slight decline no one should be patting themselves on the back.

“It takes years to fix a broken health system. Everyone can pat themselves on the back when we have enough beds and staff in our hospitals.”

Health Minister Chris Picton accused the former Liberal government of “neglecting health.”

He noted the government is adding 550 more hospital beds

and has employed 550 more clinicians, along with rostering more clinicians on weekends to streamline discharges and investing in alternatives to hospitals.

“For the first time in a long time, the numbers of patients stuck in emergency beds waiting for a ward bed is starting to trend downwards, however there is still much more to be done,” he said.

“The key issue is not enough beds in hospital wards – which is why we are building hundreds more beds.

“We need more ward beds in our hospitals to move patients out of EDs and that is exactly why we are investing record funding to build more capacity right across our hospital system.”

Opposition health spokeswoman Ashton Hurn accused the government of downgrading health as a priority.

“Every single week there are around 170 people waiting an entire day or more to be seen in our emergency departments – it is a frightening result and the worst it's been in five years,” she said.

“The Labor Party came to office promising to fix ramping and fix health, but this is another clear sign that health doesn't seem to be Peter Malinauskas' priority now he's Premier.”

A SA Health statement notes patients presenting to EDs are prioritised based on clinical need with those requiring urgent care seen first.

“Increases in wait times align with surges in Covid hospitalisations and respiratory illness in the community, as well as rises in mental health presentations,” it says.

“A hospital is not always the most appropriate place for mental health patients.”

## Abuse hidden in bank deposits

Cydonee Mardon

In a world first, one of Australia's biggest banks has joined police in the battle to catch out predators sneakily using banking transactions to terrorise their partners and ex-partners.

Believing they can get around court orders and AVOs to refrain from contacting the protected person, these offenders are using transactions to not only contact but to intimidate and harass with menacing messages – under the guise of depositing money.

Some transactions are even as small as one cent, with messages left in the “reference”.

The Commonwealth Bank of Australia has teamed up with NSW Police for a pilot program to identify abuse and then when necessary and with the approval of the victim, involve police.

Head of Customer Vulnerability Caroline Wall said the bank discovered an issue back in 2019 when one customer sought help. “She came to our specialist team and we saw in her bank statements pages and pages of one-cent transactions with really abusive messages,” Ms Wall said.

“We went to work to see if this was a one-off or if there is a more insidious pattern.

“Within three months we discovered there were 8000 customers who received low-value deposits for the purpose of delivering messages.”

Ms Wall said CommBank immediately changed its terms and conditions to alert customers the unacceptable behaviour would be called out. Next it put a block on online banking for any electronic transactions that used profanities.

“The problem we found was that the most insidious forms of abuse didn't come from any profanity, it was messages that were very nuanced to the victim-survivor,” she said.

“Things like ‘I know your new address’ or ‘Unblock me or I'm showing up at your house’.

“You can't identify those individual words so we built an AI model that looks at a range of things such as customers' behaviour, the intent of language, the volume of transactions.”

The bank then has a range of actions: warning letters to abusers, limiting access to digital banking or alerting police.