

Private health reforms an opportunity to strengthen access to care

The Federal Government should identify private maternity services at risk of closure before critical healthcare capacity is lost and classify regional private hospitals as essential infrastructure, according to a submission to the Federal Government's latest private health care review.

Calling for patient safety and access to care to be at the centre of private health reform, Avant Mutual said its proposed reforms would recognise the critical role private health services play both in maintaining access to healthcare and taking pressure off the public hospital system.

In its submission to the Federal Government's *Private Health Sector Reforms: Consultation Paper 1*, Avant proposed a national maternity viability framework aimed at identifying essential services at risk and enabling earlier intervention where closures would materially reduce access to care.

At least 18 private maternity units have closed across Australia since 2018, with regional communities particularly affected and some areas left with little or no private maternity choice.

Avant Chief Medical Officer, Professor Steve Robson, a specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist, said the viability of private maternity services is an urgent public policy issue.

"Without targeted and early intervention, private maternity services will continue to close, reducing choice for families and placing additional pressure on the public health system," Professor Robson said.

"By establishing a targeted national maternity viability framework to identify private maternity services at risk of closure, steps can be taken before it is too late.

"This is about ensuring patients have choice and can continue to access maternity services close to where they live. This will also avoid unnecessary strain on other parts of the health system, including public hospitals."

Avant is also proposing that regional private hospitals be classified as essential infrastructure, applying the same principle that is used to support telecommunications in rural and regional Australia.

"There is a clear irony in telecommunications infrastructure being recognised as essential because it helps improve access to healthcare in rural and regional Australia, while the private hospitals that actually deliver that care are not," Professor Robson said.

"Maintaining a strong private health sector in rural and regional communities is essential to ensuring patients can access quality care and must remain a priority for government.

"Many regional private hospitals are under significant strain and, in many cases, cannot survive on market forces alone, despite delivering essential health services to their communities.

"Just as governments have recognised the need to support telecommunications infrastructure in regional Australia, a dedicated Regional Hospital Sustainability Scheme would help preserve local health services," Professor Robson said.

Avant also encouraged the government to expand its proposal around allowing overseas psychiatrists to practise in private hospitals.

“To ensure continuity of care and avoid fragmentation, we recommend extending this reform to private practice outside hospitals,” Professor Robson said.

“Maintaining continuity of care is particularly important in psychiatry, with international evidence showing that models supporting seamless transition between inpatient and outpatient care reduce emergency department visits and readmissions.

“If implemented well, this initiative could help address workforce challenges in psychiatry while improving access to care for patients.”

A copy of Avant’s full submission, detailing its other recommendations for private health reform, is available [here](#).

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About Avant

As Australia’s largest medical defence organisation and a member owned mutual, Avant represents more than 95,000 members—over half the nation’s medical workforce—across general practice and every specialty. Alongside medical indemnity, we provide services such as private health insurance and practice management support, giving us unique insight into the healthcare system in which doctors work.

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