

AMMA JOURNAL VOL 6 ISSUE 1

MARCH 1997

Opening of the New Medical Facility at RAAF Base, Richmond

Speech by the Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel

by

The Honourable Bronwyn Bishop MP

On Thursday, 20 February 1997, a new medical facility to house No 3 RAAF Hospital at Richmond Air Force Base was officially opened by the Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel, The Honourable Bronwyn Bishop MP. Australian Military Medicine is pleased to publish the Minister's speech at this auspicious occasion.

Thank you for asking me here today to open this magnificent, new, \$12.5 million medical facility.

I am pleased to visit Richmond again. I was last here for the presentation of the Governor General's Banner to the Hospital. The Banner has become a treasured icon to members of the Unit, and it is richly deserved after over half a century's uninterrupted care to our servicemen and women.

You don't often see so many senior Royal Australian Air Force Officers in one place. I think that underlines the importance of today's event. This new facility is one of two fully capable hospitals within the RAAF and the only one that has been built as a single project.

No 3 Hospital

Number 3 RAAF Hospital was formed in 1940, as a collection of temporary and converted buildings. With World War II, the hospital expanded rapidly. By the end of the War, it reached a peak capacity of 500 beds.

In 1959, the hospital took on responsibility for aeromedical evacuations. It played an important role in the Vietnam conflict. One day in 1967, 51 casualties were evacuated from Vung Tau to Richmond in just 17 hours.

During Cyclone Tracy, 3 Hospital evacuated 2 000 people and 400 patients from Darwin to southern medical centres.

The hospital again came to the aid of the civil community during the 1994 Sydney bush fires. Over 100 elderly people were evacuated to 3 Hospital from nursing homes in the Blue Mountains.

The Hospital has been involved in a number of international humanitarian operations, notably the difficult United Nations' mission to Rwanda.

3 Hospital provides a comprehensive range of general hospital services here in Richmond. It also has an air transportable health centre, which means members are always on stand-by for deployment. The hospital's motto, "Care Where Needed" is therefore entirely appropriate.

Medical Support to the ADF

When I was appointed as Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel, I came armed with the Coalition's pre-election promise that we would maintain all health and dental benefits available to permanent and reserve ADF personnel and we have kept that promise.

One of my prime concerns was the shortfall in medical and dental officers within the Australian Defence Force.

When I was briefed on the magnitude of the problem by the Surgeon General, I was appalled that the shortages had been allowed to reach this crisis level.

In many ways the situation is comparable with the problem of recruiting civilian doctors to work in remote rural parts of Australia.

However, the case of Defence is perhaps even worse: surely, we cannot expect our service men and women to fight for their country if we cannot guarantee them the clinical support they need - this is particularly important for deployable units. Free quality health care to serving members is not only a powerful recruitment tool, it is very important in terms of the maintenance of morale and the retention of personnel in uniform.

Consequently, we will review medical and dental officers' pay as part of a general review of officers' pay in 1997. The medical and dental officers' bounty and gratuity are currently under separate review. Pay and allowance reforms are to be progressed as part of a package of measures covering training, accreditation, professional development and improved career planning.

But the job of 3 Hospital goes beyond serving Australian military personnel. I have already given examples of how the hospital assists the wider community in national disasters and local emergencies.

The completion of this new facility is long overdue. A former RAAF medical officer recalls that when he requested new lino for the floors of the wards in the old facility, his superiors turned him down because "the new facility would be built within 18 months". Well, that was in 1955!

I would like to conclude by offering my best wishes to the staff of 3 Hospital. While we hope and pray that you will not have to deal with the casualties of war, we can rest assured that you will rise to the challenge- whatever it may be.