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Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding

Witness Statement

Name: Ms Jill Harris

Occupation: Director of Radiation therapy at Westmead and Blacktown Hospitals

A. Role

1. I am the Director of the radiation therapy Department at Western Sydney Local Health District (WSLHD). I have been in this role since 2004 and I have been working for NSW Health since 1988. Radiation therapy is only available at Westmead Hospital and Blacktown Hospital within WSLHD.
2. Radiation therapy is the therapeutic process by which high levels of ionising radiation is delivered to treat cancer. Treatment regimens are prescribed and managed by a Radiation Oncologist. A radiation therapist is the person who designs and then delivers the radiation treatment via a machine. It is a precise discipline as there can be significant adverse health outcomes if healthy (non-cancerous cells) receive the radiation.
3. My role as Director includes managing the radiation therapy staff across both Hospitals, managing the patient cohort (whom are receiving treatment for cancer) and the strategic direction of the department.

B. Radiation therapy training

4. Radiation therapy is offered as an undergraduate degree at two universities within NSW at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga and University of Newcastle in Newcastle. Monash University offers a post-graduate qualification in radiation therapy.
5. I regularly meet with the University of Newcastle as WSLHD takes their students for clinical placements. My department takes around 5 students per clinical placement, of which there are up to 13 per year. The clinical placements encompass 52 weeks of the year. Their placements

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vary in length depending on what stage their studies are at. I understand from these meetings that radiation therapy has an attrition rate due to students transferring to other courses such as medicine or to similar allied health qualifications, including radiography or pathology.

C. Current staffing at WSLHD

6. There is budget for 72 FTE in my department across Blacktown Hospital and Westmead Hospital. This 72 FTE includes an MRI radiographer, four specialist radiation therapists, radiation therapists and head of section managers who oversee the day-to-day treatment provided within the respective Hospital units.
7. In February 2024, I there was a vacancy of 20-25% FTE in my department. Due to this level of vacancies, there was a 12-week waitlist to commence radiation therapy at WSLHD. As I did not have enough staff to operate all the radiation therapy machines and one machine was not in operation. The reasons for this vacancy rate were multifactorial, including maternity leave and difficulty in attracting staff.
8. As at July 2024, the vacancy rate in my department is around 10%. The waitlist for radiation treatment is around 4 weeks and all machines in my department are in operation. The decline in the vacancy rate is due to four staff members returning from maternity leave, an intake of a graduate cohort and the hiring and use of overseas qualified radiation therapists in a casual pool at WSLHD to fill gaps in the roster. My department has worked hard to recruit and attract staff.

D. WSLHD interpretation of the Health Employees' Medical Radiation Scientists (State) Award

9. Radiation therapy was a three-year degree until around 8 years ago. When radiation therapy was a three-year course, the first year of employment for a Radiation therapist was a year of a supervised practice program (SPP). During their year of SPP, a radiation therapist would be employed as a Level 1 under the Health Employees' Medical Radiation Scientists (State) Award (the Award). After completing a year of SPP, a radiation therapist was eligible for registration

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with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). Once AHPRA registered, a radiation therapist would progress to Level 2 on the Award's pay scale. The last time a radiation therapist was doing SPP in my department was around 5 years ago.

10. When radiation therapy became a four-year degree, graduate radiation therapists entered the workforce already registered with AHPRA and a year of SPP was not necessary.
11. Other metropolitan LHDs considered there to be discretion under the Award to employ graduate radiation therapists at Level 2.
12. WSLHD did not agree and continued to hire graduate radiation therapists as Level 1 under the Award, even though they were AHPRA registered and did not need a year of SPP. This disadvantaged WSLHD when trying to attract graduates as this Award interpretation can result in a \$25,000 difference in pay over 5 years. I was asked by prospective graduates during the recruitment process whether they would be paid as Level 1 or Level 2 under the Award at WSLHD.
13. It was only in late 2023 that this discrepancy in how the award was interpreted (and therefore discrepancy in starting salary) was resolved. I was involved in seeking a Determination from the Ministry of Health, being Determination 25 of 2023 (the Determination), which found graduate radiation therapists could be hired at Level 2. I have only hired one intake of graduates since the Determination was made.

E. Recruitment of radiation therapists

14. The recruitment system at NSW Health is slow and difficult to use. It can take up to five or six months to hire someone, regardless of the type of role or whether it is a temporary or full-time position. The recruitment process does not easily enable the hiring of someone to fill a maternity cover.

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15. The recruitment process includes the need to write a request to fill the role and when approved, a centralised district administrative officer posting the advertisement for the role. There is an interview process of candidates and those considered suitable undergo safety checks on other government platforms (such as national police check and Working with Children's Check (WWCC)). An offer of employment to a candidate must then be approved.
16. In my role of Director, there have been several instances where candidates may have already accepted and commenced other employment by the time I make an offer of employment. I have made a particular effort to stay in contact and encourage students following their clinical placements to persist with the lengthy recruitment process if they desired to return to my department as a graduate.
17. Stafflink is used by every LHD in NSW. It maintains an online profile and record for every member of staff and information including their vaccination status, their national police check and WWCC. The recruitment process, even for an existing staff member being internally promoted, requires a new vetting and checking process (i.e. national police check and WWCC) to be undertaken, even if current checks are stored in Stafflink.

F. A casual workforce and overseas recruitment

18. During the covid pandemic, I was given approval by WSLHD to establish a casual pool of registered radiation therapists. The casual pool has helped me to fill gaps in my roster. As the urgency of the pandemic has passed, the approval for recruitment to the casual pool has been withdrawn and I am no longer able to hire people into that pool.
19. A downside of the casual pool is that only radiation therapists hired by WSLHD could be recruited into that pool. This means, for example, that a radiation therapist from Royal North Shore Hospital could not be given casual shifts in my Department because they are not an employee of WSLHD.

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20. In future, a state based casual pool of radiation therapists (like they have for nursing staff) would be helpful to fill roster gaps.
21. The casual pool has helped me recruit overseas trained staff to alleviate staffing shortages in my department. I was approached by numerous Irish trained radiation therapists who were in Australia on Working Holiday visas. Due to requirements of that visa, I am not able to offer permanent positions, however, the casual pool enabled me to employ these practitioners.

G. Retention of radiation therapists in NSW

22. There is a shortage of radiation therapists in NSW and there is difficulty in retaining radiation therapists in the public health system. There are numerous factors impacting retention. Under the NSW Award, there is limited pay or career progression after a certain point. For example, the award only has five levels of remuneration and thereafter there are a limited number of managerial roles. Managerial roles do not frequently become available and are often occupied by long term staff. For example, I have been in the Director role for 20 years. When senior roles do become available, they are hotly contested. Last year, I advertised a role for a senior radiation therapist and there were 18 applicants. I do not expect a similar senior role to become available again for some time.
23. There has been an attrition of senior and well-experienced radiation therapists to private radiation therapy clinics. Private radiation therapy clinics situated at private hospitals have opened in the general vicinity of WSLHD, such as Norwest Private Hospital in the Hills District. This attrition of senior and experienced radiation therapists are to senior or managerial roles in those private clinics which offer higher levels of pay compared to the public health system.
24. Radiation therapists have also left employment with my department after finding work closer to home. Many staff in my department (myself included) live on the outskirts of Sydney or further way in areas such as Lithgow or the Central Coast. A number of radiation therapy clinics opened

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on the Central Coast following various hospital upgrades and several staff who lived in that area left my department to fill roles in those new clinics.

25. There has also been an attrition of all experiences of radiation therapists from my department interstate. The pay offered to radiation therapists interstate, such as under the Queensland Award is more than what NSW offers for all experience levels. For example, a radiation therapist with two years' experience can earn the equivalent of a NSW Grade VI (usually 10+ years of experience). There are also incentives such as free rent and retention bonuses offered for radiation therapists to move to rural and regional areas. These bonuses are unavailable in metropolitan areas.

Name: Jillian Harris

Date: 12.07.2024

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. E. Harris', with a horizontal line underneath.

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