Indigenous patients in limbo over dialysis row

By Nance Haxton for AM

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South Australian Aborigines are travelling hundreds of kilometres away from their communities for renal dialysis because of an impasse between the South Australian and Northern Territory Governments.

The NT has refused to allow SA patients to undergo dialysis in Alice Springs, saying that the centre is being pushed beyond capacity.

And the Federal Government is refusing to get involved in the matter.

Alice Springs was traditionally the central place where Aboriginal people needing treatment could go, but the funding deadlock between the states means that people from the APY Lands in South Australia's remote north now have to travel hundreds of kilometres to Port Augusta, Whyalla or Adelaide if they need renal dialysis.

Uniting Care Wesley's manager for Indigenous policy, Jonathan Nicholls, says the situation has become intractable.

"If you're in Alice Springs, you're probably on average about 500 kilometres from your home community," he said.

"You're in a place where over many years - decades - there's been skills built up to deal with people from remote Aboriginal communities.

"When you come to Adelaide, you're 1,500 kilometres from your home community and there's a lot less skill here in Adelaide to deal with some of those very big challenges for people who are coming out of a very traditional-oriented society.

"And when you're 1,500 kilometres from home, there isn't that opportunity to go home for a brief visit for cultural reasons or to attend a funeral that there is from Alice Springs."

Treatments untenable

SA Health Minister John Hill was not available for an interview, but his spokeswoman says the state pays for existing South Australian patients getting renal treatment at Alice Springs.

She says the agreement reached with the NT Government means that new patients will be treated in SA and
they are increasing services to accommodate them.

SA shadow health minister Duncan McFetridge says the treatment arrangements are untenable.

"Driving Piplajara to Port Augusta is like driving from Adelaide to Sydney. The problem is you're driving over 600 kilometres of pretty ordinary roads," he said.

"To expect people in the APY lands who are suffering from kidney diseases to leave those lands, leave their families, leave their communities and drive to Port Augusta or Adelaide is just unconscionable."

**Leadership needed**

Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon has tabled a letter to Parliament calling on the states to resolve the situation.

But Greens Senator Rachel Siewert says it is time for the Federal Government to intervene.

"The South Australian Government has not reached an agreement with the NT and at this stage, I understand, is refusing to put in additional resources so that patients from the north of South Australia can access Alice Springs - which is of course much closer than Port Augusta or Adelaide," she said.

"It's not a case of [the Federal Government] taking over - we think it's actually a case of showing some leadership.

"They invest, very significantly, in renal health and they also have made a very strong commitment to closing the gap in Aboriginal life expectancy.

"In order to do that, they need to be ensuring that people can access dialysis."

But Uniting Care Wesley's Jonathan Nicholls says while the bureaucracies bicker, Aboriginal people are suffering needlessly.

"What we've got happening with dialysis is return to a fragmented, fractured approach, and that's a disaster," he said.

"We're dealing with significant Indigenous disadvantage and health concerns."

**Tags:** indigenous, state-parliament, states-and-territories, diseases-and-disorders, healthcare-facilities, liver-and-kidneys, aboriginal, australia, nt, alice-springs-0870, sa, adelaide-5000, port-augusta-5700