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## **Health a moving target as population booms**

*It's time to build a hospital in Morisset, writes Greg Piper.*

IT'S hard to hit a moving target, but this is what health planners will need to do in western Lake Macquarie.

When the NSW Department of Health released Future Directions for Health in NSW in February last year it was based on a population increase between 11 per cent and 20 per cent for the period 2001 to 2026. The Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, published four months earlier by the Department of Planning, provides for a regional growth rate of 31 per cent.

Morisset's growth will greatly exceed this regional figure, with its population projected to increase by 82 per cent from 2006 to 2031. The town is identified by the Department of Planning as an emerging major regional centre and Lake Macquarie City Council foresees additional developments.

According to the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy, Morisset will have a concentration of business, higher order retailing, employment, professional services and generally include civic functions and facilities. Presumably NSW Health didn't use the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy's projections because other regional strategies are not yet complete.

Hunter New England Health's strategic plans extend only to 2011 and are being revised. It's both timely and essential that these plans are redrawn. Health planning must align with development planning and demographic change to overcome the real and worsening disadvantage suffered by Morisset.

The Morisset Hospital Steering Committee has done a laudable job of analysing its community's health needs and its case for a new hospital should be heard. The Morisset area has a population of 23,000 and no hospital.

In the Hunter Valley, six smaller population centres have hospitals with a total of 194 beds. Morisset's added disadvantage is that its nearest hospital is 35 kilometres away and not easily accessible by public transport.

Already the proportion of over 55s in Morisset is significantly above the national average, with this age group set to grow considerably. When new families with children under 15 are added, the health system's two biggest user groups will be greatly over-represented.

There is a hierarchy of planning documents already generally aligned to deliver a new hospital. The NSW State Plan, the key strategy for every service provided by the Government, states a commitment to making future health services available where they will be most needed according to projected population. That statement sits well with this proposal.

At the next level of the hierarchy, the State Health Plan says resources will be allocated to meet the health needs of people in various geographic areas of the state on an equitable population health needs basis. It also says services will be of high quality, safe, appropriate and available when and where needed. Other health plans at state and regional levels espouse values such as fairness and equity. They consider factors such as population, location, transport and specific needs of groups.

These plans also make commitments such as the right services in the right location, infrastructure to meet population growth and strategies to meet service gaps. They list actions such as planning, consultation, community participation, responding to changing demographics and linking future service needs to asset requirements.

Through these documents the NSW Government, NSW Health and Hunter New England Health have set a direction that must be followed. Hunter New England Health's regional plans are valid; it's just that the fine detail needs to be updated.

This problem can be solved and first step can happen almost immediately. Under current regional health plans, the Morisset Community Health Centre is to be relocated to larger premises. Here is an opportunity to choose a site that can eventually accommodate the new hospital.

The Morisset community's campaign for a hospital has matured. The committee's work has added evidence to what was previously anecdote. The stage of public meetings, petitions and letter writing has passed. It's now time for the evidence to be considered and judged on its merits.

This should lead to a commitment for a new hospital. I believe that the NSW Government can make this commitment. Treasury figures comparing expenditure on health infrastructure in the Hunter and Sydney over the past 10 years show that this region received \$485 per person compared with Sydney's \$880 per person.

The NSW government spends less than half the amount on a Hunter resident that it spends on a Sydney resident. This disparity is clearly even greater in south-western Lake Macquarie.

This is inequitable and presents a clear case for change.

**Greg Piper is State member for Lake Macquarie and Mayor of Lake Macquarie.**