

Tasmania's Gutwein Government 'Patients First' policy puts patients last

By *Hayden O'Connor*

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As Tasmanians head to the polls where health is tipped to be a major issue, Tasmania's health system seems to be in crisis. [Hayden O'Connor reports.](#)

HEALTH is a policy area that all governments must get right. Regardless of one's political leanings, almost all voters would agree that a strong health system is vital to our society.

Unfortunately for Tasmanians, the [Hodgman/Gutwein](#) Liberal Government has overseen a decline in the standards of Tasmania's health system. They've had seven years to get the health crisis under control and their failure to do so could have Tasmanians looking to remove the now minority Liberal Government from power.

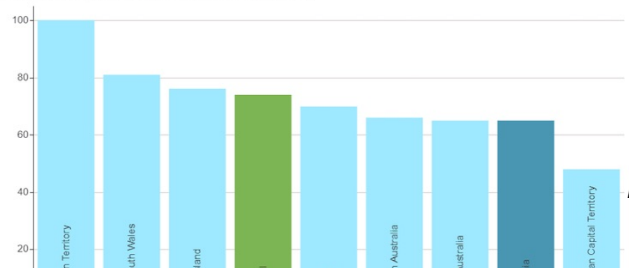
In 2016, the then Health Minister [Michael](#)

[Ferguson](#) announced a [new initiative called "Patients First"](#), unveiling a [set of actions](#) designed to "manage demand" in emergency departments and 'improve whole-of-hospital patient flow at the Royal Hobart and Launceston General Hospitals'.

The objective of the Patients First initiative was excellent. The delivery? Not so much. Ambulance ramping has been a constant problem in Tasmania, which has only gotten worse since the announcement of Patients First, increasing by 149% between 2012 and 2018, according to the [2018-19 Auditor-General's report](#). This was despite only a 20% increase in presentations to emergency departments via ambulance. Even now, in 2021, ambulance ramping has not improved, with both the [Royal Hobart Hospital](#) (RHH) and [Launceston General Hospital](#) reporting [issues with ambulance ramping](#) in the first weeks of January.

Between June 2018 and January 2019 the RHH was bed blocked 93% of the time. This is still a problem in 2021 with GPs in the South being urged to take more [aged care patients to reduce bed blocking at the RHH](#). This is further supported by data from the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#), which shows that Tasmania in 2019-2020, across all triage categories, only treated 65% of patients within the national benchmark — the equal second-lowest in the country.

Total, percentage treated within national benchmarks



A figure caption for your reading pleasure

One factor contributing to bed blocking and ambulance ramping is unnecessary presentations to the emergency department. The accessibility to general practitioners (GPs) or lack of is likely a contributing factor, with 8.3% of Tasmanians [delaying or not seeing a GP at all, due to the costs](#). Although GP affordability has slightly improved from the previous year, Tasmania still has the highest percentage of people in Australia unable to visit their GP due to costs.

Figure 10.4a Measure 1: People delaying or not seeing GPs due to cost by jurisdiction, by year



A figure caption for your reading pleasure

Not only does Tasmania have severe problems once a patient reaches the emergency department, but the state also fails to respond to emergency calls in a timely fashion, with Tasmania's [ambulance response times the slowest in the country](#). This should be concerning for voters given that Tasmania is the smallest state — if anything, Tasmania should have one of the fastest response times, particularly in the cities.

These damning statistics don't appear to faze Peter Gutwein and his Government. Their election health system policies pretend that Tasmanian's health system is well managed and under control. The term ambulance ramping isn't even mentioned in their policy details and the Liberal Government certainly doesn't accept the view that Tasmania's health system is in crisis.

Of course, this approach is to be expected. When you've been in power for seven years, you have no excuses. You can't blame the previous Government — for Gutwein to admit

there is a crisis, that would be the same as admitting his Government is at fault. Make no mistake, though, the major issues with emergency department care in Tasmania exist because the Hodgman/Gutwein Government has neglected to fix them.

On top of the extensive list of emergency department problems, Tasmania's hospitals also have issues with staffing. Nurses are stressed and overworked. [Their 18-hour double shifts](#) are just another example of a poorly managed and neglected health system.

Thanks to ambulance ramping, bed blocking and ambulance response times, Tasmania is the worst state to be in if you need emergency health care. That should have most Tasmanians considering a change in government. After all, your life may very well depend on it.

Tasmania's Premier Peter Gutwein is asked about his decision to go to a snap election in May, a time Opposition Leader Rebecca White will be heavily pregnant. "I have given this a great deal of thought." [#Politas](#) [#Auspol](#) [@SBSNews](#) [@s_maunder](#) pic.twitter.com/b4aCiPWM1B

— Naveen Razik (@naveenjrazik) [March 26, 2021](#)

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If this isn't the Liberal Gutwein Government failing all Tasmanians I don't know what is [#auspol](#) [#politias](#) [#tasvotes](#) [#health](#) pic.twitter.com/UQoxLIMfd2.

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