



Sensible pathway in health

PRUE POWER

The issue of death and dying is difficult enough without clouding it with suggestions that the ACT Government is selling us down the drain by linking the purchase of Calvary Hospital with the sale of Claire Holland House.

ACT citizens should ignore these unsubstantiated allegations and look at the facts. The ACT is a small jurisdiction with a population base half the size of an area health service in NSW or an area network in Victoria. Its regional population, including the surrounding districts of the ACT, brings that population base up to a comparable health system in our surrounding jurisdictions. We cannot afford to run two separate hospital systems. So the purchase of Calvary makes perfect sense, and one that the community seems to endorse. Such a purchase enables the Little Company of Mary to build up its private-health component as well as any other infrastructure requirements it has.

The more problematic issue for some, but not all, of the community is the sale of the hospice and the fact that the sale is linked to the Government's purchase of Calvary. However, this linkage should be supported by the community. The LCM has a proven track record of providing outstanding palliative care services, not just in the ACT but also in other jurisdictions. It is what it is best at. It is worth emphasising that it is doing this right now, each day, at Claire Holland House. The LCM has done this without imposing any religious requirements on inpatients and

their families whether they are the Catholic faith or not.

The hospice will continue to be conducted as a public facility which will include a contract with the Government for the delivery of palliative care services. There will be just two differences if the sale goes ahead. Firstly, that the name on the title deed will change and, secondly, that the LCM will have money to build up the service further, complementing that already provided by government. The opportunity for the latter improvement cancels out any trivial concern about land ownership.

It is a furphy to suggest that a private operator is being introduced into our jurisdiction. LCM has been working publicly in the ACT since the 1970s, and again the hospice will be conducted as a public facility with a contract between the LCM and the Government.

Public-health policy issues such as the unlikely introduction of legalised euthanasia should not prevent this sale. The concept of euthanasia is that patients die with dignity at home, and not in a hospice. It is trite to suggest that this is also a reason to prevent the sale.

The sale of Claire Holland House will enhance our partnership with an organisation that has outstanding credibility in providing public palliative-care services. It is good health policy and in the interests of all Canberrans.

■ Prue Power is executive director, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association. ACT Health is a member of the association.