

Why it hurts to sell the hospice

Nothing's going to change when they sell Clare Holland House: The Health Minister says so, The Little Company of Mary say so. But the passionate supporters of Canberra's only hospice just aren't having a bar of it. ELERI HARRIS sits through the tears to find out why.

"CLARE Holland House is irreplaceable and needs to be very carefully protected and preserved," says Valerie Brown.

ANU Emeritus Professor Valerie Brown AO, is in the perfect position to judge the proposed sale of Canberra's only palliative care hospice Clare Holland House; she has worked in health promotion for decades, and experienced the hospice first hand – in tragic circumstances.

In 2004, her husband, former veteran press gallery journalist Wallace Brown, developed motor neurone disease, and spent the final two years of his life in the hospice community outreach program.

So when the ACT Government proposed the sale of Clare Holland House – to the Little Company of Mary Health Care Limited as part of the Calvary Hospital buy-back deal – Professor Brown was spurred to action.

"This government's policy is to keep public services in public hands," she says.

"Well, what are they doing selling a public service into private hands?"

"The integrated hospice, community outreach and volunteer program make up tremendous support and depends on the close collaboration and independence of the three arms of care.

"The support to live your life as long as you have it is just fantastic. Professionally, because I have been working on health promotion for decades, I know that it is outstanding in world terms. In Australia, it's actually a model that we follow."

It is this integrated system that the Supporters of Clare Holland House are seeking to retain. Created to represent the families of those who have lost a loved one at Clare Holland House, and with nearly 500 Facebook supporters, the group has expressed concerns about the hospice's future as a private health facility.

However, as "CityNews" went to press, Health Minister Katy Gallagher announced that the sale of Clare Holland House and the purchase of Calvary would be dealt with separately by the Assembly, saying: "I would hate to see the concern of a couple of hundred members of the community put at risk



Professor Valerie Brown with a photo of her late husband Wally... "It [Clare Holland House] belongs to the community, leave it that way." Photo by Silas.

what I see in terms of the big picture about the sustainability of our overall public health system."

Volunteer Bob Crews, whose wife passed away at Clare Holland House five years ago is concerned about the maintenance of quality services.

"I have only one question to ask: Is

there a demonstrable benefit to palliative care services from this sale?" he says. "If not, it should be removed from negotiations."

The sale of the hospice, which has always been administered by Little Company of Mary Health Care, but staff employed by the ACT Govern-

ment, would make the Catholic health-care provider solely and directly responsible for providing services.

Gallagher insists that palliative care will remain the same if and when the sale goes ahead.

"This proposal is not about the delivery of palliative care, it is about who owns the bricks and mortar," she says. "LCMHC will continue to provide the same public palliative care service that it currently provides to people of all faiths and backgrounds, and the ACT Government will continue to fully fund Clare Holland House to provide public services to all people. The hospice is not a bargaining chip."

A spokesman from Little Company of Mary Health Care said nothing will change in the integrated structure of the hospice should the sale go ahead.

"Clare Holland House will continue to operate in exactly the same way as it is now, the services will be provided in accordance with Government requirements, the ACT Palliative Care Society will continue to provide volunteers services, it will remain on the same site and it will have the same name," he says.

"The only difference will be that if Calvary Health Care owns the building then there will be greater opportunity to invest in additional services for the palliative care community in Canberra."

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New political writer



JOURNALIST Eleri Harris (pictured) has joined the writing staff of "CityNews" as our political reporter. Harris has a background in broadcast and online journalism at Crikey, AAP and Melbourne's Student Youth Network (SYN FM). Her accomplishments include a thesis

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