



# Compassionate care should be in public hands

Once they own the hospice, it won't be the LCM's top priority, **PETER O'KEEFFE** writes

In the English-speaking world, hospices are invariably charities, churches or companies. The first two are constantly cash-strapped and fund-raising, the third constantly cost-cutting and profit-seeking.

The ACT hospice is a standout. We all own it and fund it. Opened in 1995, it proclaimed this message – compassionate hospice care when you're dying is not a matter of charity, churches or profits in this territory.

That's about to change with the sale of the hospice in the Calvary deal.

Who supports the sale? Strange bedfellows.

First, the local ALP notables – the ministry and the members of the Legislative Assembly. They want to secularise Calvary and integrate it with the Canberra Hospital. The notables thought no one would care if the hospice was thrown in as a sweetener for the Little Company of Mary to abandon Calvary, and say they are surprised at the reaction.

Secondly, the LCM Health Care. They have been under pressure to surrender Calvary almost since the Royal Canberra Hospital was destroyed. The percentage of public patients in their privately run public hospital has increased, making it a government target. Calvary needs major refurbishment but LCM won't invest its own capital, perhaps because it doesn't "own" Calvary enough. The Government refuses to invest public capital unless it "owns" Calvary more.

Secretly offered the hospice and many tens of millions of dollars, LCM wants the money and has made the hospice, and a 30-year service contract, a condition of the deal.

Thirdly, the Catholic Church. It sees 30-year-old Calvary as a symbol of Catholic moral and social endeavour in Canberra, a beacon lighting up the transcendent Christian value of each human life. The Church believes LCM was

bluffed by an empty government threat to invest \$500 million building a new hospital. The Church's silence on the hospice is implicit support for the hospice sale as a second best outcome that gives LCM a new Catholic institutional base in Canberra.

Fourthly, the ACT Greens' MLAs. They support the plan to secularise and integrate Calvary. But, Assembly debutantes, they live in fear of being accused by the ALP of stymieing capital investment in a publicly owned Calvary. Hence, they view the loss of the secular hospice merely as collateral damage. Their failure to give the Government and the LCM an ultimatum to take the hospice off the table is accompanied by a smoke screen of "notes of caution" and tokenistic motions inviting the LCM to do the right thing.

Who opposes the sale? Mostly, a community of ordinary people.

First, everybody in the local ALP bar the notables. The blanket silence of party members, officials and staffers as a Catholic corporation swallows up a unique secular hospice speaks of major frustration and an edict to toe the party line. They silently acquiesce in the demise of a Canberra legacy of civic responsibility, and its usurpation by an opposite – a denominational religious corporation.

Secondly, everybody in the ACT Greens bar the MLAs. Greens' party members, officials and staffers feel that the betrayal of core constituency groups who oppose the hospice sale will provoke an organised, grassroots backlash against the Greens at the next Assembly elections.

Thirdly, the Canberra Liberals. They oppose the sale of Calvary as unjustified, wasteful, and likely to lead to more health bureaucracy. If the threat of capital starvation were dropped, LCM would not feel pressured to sell Calvary and the hospice sale wouldn't arise. The Canberra Liberals argue that LCM should keep Calvary but with new

procedures to overcome genuine obstacles to service efficiency and coordination.

Fourthly, the people of Canberra. In letters, meetings and angry protests, public sentiment is clear. The public objects to the cynical sale of its hospice and knows the ALP and Greens aren't listening yet.

Fifthly, highly credible community groups, organisations and individuals with knowledge and expertise in health policy. The ACT Palliative Care Society, the ACT Nursing Federation, the Health Care Consumers' Association, supporters of the hospice, academics, professionals and business identities, all have concerns, including staff retention, remuneration, quality and ratios.

There is consternation at the Government's obdurate insistence that a public health institution that is original, unique and inspired by civic endeavour must be sacrificed as a bargaining chip to give LCM a new, almost-ready, regional headquarters.

It is "almost-ready" because, if the sale happens, the hospice will probably be a building site as administrative offices are added, transforming the small, patient-focused institution into a lakeside administration block.

Sydney-based, with properties nationwide, the LCM's \$9 million to buy the hospice is about 1 per cent of their assets and turnover. Our unique hospice will go from 100 per cent of our resource and attention, to about 1 per cent of their investment and interest.

Like nursing homes in private hands, out of sight and out of mind, so too the hospice. The Government, once answerable to us for hospice and palliative care standards, funding and future, will wash its hands and tell us to take our complaints to Sydney.

■ Peter O'Keeffe is a lawyer with a long-standing interest in the hospice.