

*PAC tabled 31/3/14  
Alice Springs*

NT NEWS

FRI 26 OCT 2012, Page 020

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MORE than 1500 drunks have been taken to Alice Springs Hospital by police since the death in custody of Kwementyaye Briscoe nine months ago.

Centre for Remote Health director John Wakerman said he understood why police were being extra careful. But he said the extra number of patients was adding extreme pressure to an already overworked hospital. Prof Wakerman said the town's sobering-up shelter couldn't cope with the flood of drunks, and more beds were needed.

Deputy Chief Minister Robyn Lambley said the NT Government would examine the potential effect of the additional sobering-up shelters. Up to six drunks a night are being taken to the hospital's emergency department. "Police are understandably taking a very cautious approach in dealing with intoxicated people," Prof Wakerman said. "I feel sorry for the police. They are just avoiding risks. They are making sure people are checked out medically. "And some (of the drunks) must be admitted to hospital," Prof Wakerman said.

Alice Springs Hospital is one of the busiest hospitals in Australia. The population of Central Australia is 48,000 and the hospital sees 40,000 patients a year.

Ms Lambley said the Government would:

ENGAGE traditional owners in alcohol reforms;

ENDEAVOUR to strike a balance between supply and demand measures to curb alcohol consumption; and

WORK with police to ensure officers continued to be positioned in front of licensed premises.