



Protests after health summit postponed

Joanna Heath

Conservative-led states have expressed dismay at the indefinite postponement of a meeting of state and territory health ministers at which grievances on federal public hospital funding were due to be aired.

It was to take place alongside the Council of Australian Governments meeting this week but state governments said they were told on Monday the meeting of the Standing Council on Health on Friday would be postponed because its chair, Tasmania's **Michelle O'Byrne**, was unable to attend.

"Given that neither [Ms O'Byrne], nor two other ministers were able to attend this Friday, and considering the relatively light agenda, it was decided that the Standing Council on Health meeting would be deferred," a spokesman for Ms O'Byrne said.

A spokesman for federal Health Minister **Tanya Plibersek** said on Tuesday the decision was due to three governments pulling out at short notice, but Western Australia and the ACT, whose health ministers were also unable to attend, said there had been long-standing conflicts with other responsibilities.

Queensland and NSW had been planning to use the health ministers' meeting to demand the return of a collective \$242 million of federal hospital funding which had been cut retrospectively halfway through this financial year as part of a recalculation of population figures in last year's Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook.

"The last-minute cancellation of this meeting pulled the rug from under our efforts to find a solution. It smells like

political expediency from the Labor Party and sheer panic by Minister **Plibersek**," Queensland Health Minister **Lawrence Springborg** said.

"It's two months since an independent parliamentary committee called on the federal minister to return hundreds of millions of dollars that was cut from state health budgets mid-year," he said.

NSW Health Minister **Jillian Skinner** also said she was "disappointed" the meeting would not go ahead, and looked forward to it being rescheduled.

Victorian Minister for Health **David Davis** said three hospitals had not yet received their share of the \$107 million that was due to be returned after Ms Plibersek's dramatic decision in February to bypass Victoria's government.

"It is very disappointing that the Standing Council on Health meeting, scheduled for this Friday, has been cancelled," Mr Davis said. Victoria wanted a federal response on its demand for restoration of \$368 million cut in promised funding to the state over the next three financial years.

With the main COAG meeting in Canberra on Friday expected to be dominated by funding for the federal government's Gonski education reforms and the national disability insurance scheme, there are fears health will be overlooked.

According to an agenda for the standing council meeting obtained by *The Australian Financial Review*, other items included a proposed national ban on commercial solariums, organ donation policies, legislative controls to reduce the harm associated with petrol sniffing and volatile substance use, and a report on progress of the Australian response to HIV and AIDS.