

Super clinic challenge over foreign doctor ban

TONY RAGGATT | May 10th, 2013

TOWNSVILLE'S \$5 million GP Super Clinic has been hamstrung by refusing to allow overseas trained doctors to work in it.

The 1500sqm federally-funded clinic in Hermit Park is nearly completed but looks likely to stand vacant as not enough Australian doctors are available to man the facility.

The company which won the contract to operate the super clinic confirmed yesterday it was challenging the Government's backflip over the employment of overseas-trained doctors, particularly for after-hours care.

"We have referred a decision the Government made not to allow us to recruit overseas-trained doctors to the Townsville Federal Magistrates Court," Nicholl Holdings director Evan Nicholls said yesterday.

The case is set down for hearing on May 22.

"The Government allocated \$5 million for the benefit of the people of Townsville and I believe that if you put a policy in place you should have the gumption to back it," he said.

Dr Nicholls rejected suggestions the clinic's opening had been delayed, saying final works on the Charters Towers Rd building would begin next week and be complete in three months. But the clinic has been delayed by at least four years.

Then regional development spokesman, and now backbencher, Simon Crean, announced the \$5 million commitment in 2007, promising it would include privately practising GP services with after-hours care, chronic disease management services and allied health services, such as physiotherapy.

It was to take pressure off the Townsville Hospital's emergency department and the funding was to be allocated in 2008-09.

The clinic was to be housed in a new building at Aitkenvale but the developer went broke. Dr Nicholls said another site had to be found.

The Government issues Medicare provider numbers to overseas-trained doctors in areas deemed a District of Workforce Shortage but has allowed exemptions, including at Townsville, until September last year when the rules were revised.

Townsville-Mackay Medicare Local practice network chairman Dr Kevin Arlett believed there should be "one rule for everyone in a region" whether overseas doctors were allowed or not.

Townsville Liberal National Party MP Ewen Jones said only "this Government" could have a super clinic without any GPs.

Federal Health Minister Tanya Plibersek's office had not responded to the Townsville Bulletin's questions by the time of publication.

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