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Growing ranks of elderly put system under pressure Hospitals feel the strain

By Peter Jean
Health Reporter

Australia's ageing population is already starting to place pressure on the health system as the number of people aged 85 and older admitted to hospital surges.

Public and private hospital bed numbers are also struggling to keep pace with population growth, hospital statistics for 2011-12 released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show.

Institute spokeswoman Jenny Hargreaves said that between 2007-08 and 2011-12, the number of hospital admissions by people aged 85 and over rose by 9 per cent a year.

Overall, hospital admissions grew

by 4 per cent a year.

"In 2011-12, people aged 85 and over, who make up less than 2 per cent of the population, accounted for 7 per cent of all hospital admissions and 13 per cent of days spent by patients in hospital," Ms Hargreaves said.

More than 7100 of these admissions occurred in ACT public hospitals.

People aged at least 85 years were more likely than other admitted hospital patients to require an overnight stay.

The number of Australians aged

over 85 is expected to grow from more than 400,000 to 1.8 million by 2050.

Despite a continued growth in

hospital admissions, the number of available hospital beds compared to population declined between 2007-08 and 2011-12.

The average number of available public hospital beds per 1000 Australians fell from 2.66 to 2.60.

The average number of available private hospital beds per 1000 people remained steady at 1.26 per 1000 people.

In the ACT, the number of available public hospital beds compared to population increased slightly, from an average of 2.5 per 1000 people in 2007-08 to 2.6 per 1000 in 2011-12.

Both major ACT political parties promised during the lead-up to the 2012 election to open additional hospital beds, including at a new

sub-acute hospital, if they won the poll.

A spokeswoman for Chief Minister Katy Gallagher said Labor had opened more than 260 hospital beds since coming to government in 2001.

Labor has promised to open 69 extra beds at Calvary Public Hospital,

26 mental health beds, 19 beds at the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children and 12 additional "hospital in the home" places.

The Institute of Health and Welfare Report showed that the number of overnight public hospital admissions in the ACT had increased from just under 33,000 in 2007-08 to 41,000 in 2011-12.

The report also indicated that the ACT had the highest-paid full-time

public hospital nurses in Australia, a point sure to be made by the government in continuing salary negotiations.

Full-time nurses in the ACT's public hospitals had average salaries of \$112,000, compared to \$105,000 in the next-highest Northern Territory and a national average of \$89,000.

ACT salaried medical officers earned an average of \$205,000, less than their Northern Territory colleagues (\$232,000) and medical officers in Western Australia (\$181,000).

ACT public hospital administrative and clerical staff were paid an average of \$83,000, compared to \$79,000 in NSW and a national average of \$66,000.