

Brave decision

Ignoring ambulance bypass of Mersey saves woman's life

By Libby Bingham

DEVONPORT businessman Ken Overton says his wife Lyn may not be here today if a paramedic hadn't ignored the ambulance bypass of the Mersey Community Hospital when she collapsed in cardiac arrest a week ago.

The fit and healthy 47-year-old is an avid gym enthusiast who had no idea a broken leg would develop into a blood clot and in an instant threaten her life.

On Friday MCH director of surgery Dr Philip Lamont said it was thanks to the brave actions of the ambulance officers that Mrs Overton was still alive.

He said they knew she wouldn't make it to Burnie.

Dr Lamont announced on Friday specialists at the MCH will strike at midnight on Wednesday unless obstetric and paediatric services are fully restored.

Dr Lamont said bit by bit Healthscope was systematically dismantling the hospital.

But Health Minister David Llewellyn said it was unreasonable of the surgeons to think he could magically re-instate services. Mr Llewellyn said Healthscope, not the Government, employed the staff so the specialists needed to take their concerns to Healthscope.

Meanwhile yesterday, Mrs Overton was breathing without life support for the first time in a week and she squeezed her husband's hand. Mr Overton is in no doubt the paramedic gave Lyn her best opportunity for life.



CRUCIAL CHOICE: Devonport woman Lyn Overton is supported by her husband, Ken in the intensive care unit of Hobart's Calvary Hospital. A paramedic's decision to ignore an ambulance bypass saved Mrs Overton's life.

The MCH is on ambulance bypass for emergency services outside Monday to Friday between 9 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. because Healthscope claims staff shortages make treatment in those periods unsafe.

"The ambulance bypass could have cost my wife her life — that's the truth of it. I'm grateful to the paramedic for what he did," Mr Overton said from Calvary Hospital in Hobart where his family

is keeping a bedside vigil in the intensive care unit.

Mr Overton says the State Government must pour in whatever money is required to maintain a decent hospital service in the region.

"Whatever that means, the Government should help to achieve that. You can't put a price on life," Mr Overton said.

Mrs Overton was in church on April 4 when she told her husband she felt faint and then

collapsed into his arms. "It happened in an instant," Mr Overton said.

Two people performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and a doctor who was in the congregation also assisted for the 15 minutes Mrs Overton was treated in the church.

Mr Overton said it felt like a long time before the ambulance arrived and he later found out it had to come from Latrobe and not just around the corner from

the Oldaker St church in Devonport.

"Time is so important and I remember thinking thank goodness the ambulance unit is just around the corner. But it didn't turn out that way and I wonder how many ambulances are available since the Mersey bypass?"

"The paramedic made the decision himself to take Lyn to the Mersey. He said to me 'I will put my job on the line because I am not taking her to Burnie, she won't

make it,'" Mr Overton said.

"Lyn had to be resuscitated again at Latrobe, we nearly lost her twice," he said.

The medical crisis was caused by a blood clot which formed after a broken leg five weeks earlier. The clot moved through her heart which caused cardiac arrest and then lodged in her lung causing severe brain damage.

When the blood clot was dislodged with treatment, Mrs Overton

had a stroke.

She now has a second blood clot which is still a concern.

"Dr Stan Yastrebov was so concerned for her life he flew with her to Hobart — he discovered her eye was dilated and she'd had a stroke," Mr Overton said.

The Overton family are very strong Christians and they say it is their absolute faith in God which has seen them through a traumatic week.

"This has been traumatic for us as a family and it has only been our personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which has enabled us to cope. Lyn's life is in God's hands and we have accepted that whatever the outcome it is his will and now that we have submitted to the will of God as a family we have peace. People all over the world have been praying for Lyn," Mr Overton said.

Family friend and Devonport businessman Chas Kelly said Mrs Overton's story demonstrated the need for a hospital with qualified staff in the region.

He questioned if a private operator could run a hospital as the community requires.

"The hospital should be government-run and not driven by profit. In an area with the populations of Burnie and Devonport both cities deserve good hospital services," he said.

"Even if that means we build a central hospital at Ulverstone the bottom line is there isn't one there now and in the interim we need proper services at Latrobe and Burnie," Mr Kelly said.

Call for MCH to go public

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hospitals," Mr Best said.

The proposal comes after Healthscope claimed last month the hospital was operating obstetric and emergency services unsafely because of staff shortages.

Respected surgeon and former Devonport alderman Dr Fred Konetschnik stood with Mr Best on his proposal.

"We have to go ahead and proceed down the road to a single entity, we can't be separate because that destroys both of us," Dr Konetschnik said.

"Burnie's in as much trouble as we are in recruiting senior staff and I see this as an interim proposal to the final decision to where a single institution is going to be placed.

"Eventually we all hope it will be somewhere around Ulverstone, but who knows, only time will tell us that. (Burnie and Launceston)

have a waiting list now long enough to be a little bit embarrassing... it's important that Devonport works with Burnie for the whole benefit of the North-West Coast."

Dr Konetschnik said if the Mersey were closed, the people of Devonport would go to Launceston.

"And that will destroy the North-West Coast concept and, quite frankly, down the track it might even threaten the viability of Burnie," he said.

Health Minister David Llewellyn said Mr Best's idea was one of several proposals the Government would be considering.

"I'm happy with anyone providing any input and he's (Brenton Best) within his rights to circulate a paper to the PLP and... he's now informing the media that he has done that," Mr Llewellyn said.

"As I said to the Cradle Coast Authority and all



AGREED ON PROPOSAL: Respected surgeon and former Devonport alderman Dr Fred Konetschnik (left) and Labor MHA Brenton Best at yesterday's announcement. Picture: Jason Hollister.

other stakeholders I met with on Thursday and previously, I'm very happy to receive any suggestions, but we must wait to take on board any suggestions with leadership in the North-West region.

"We must wait till we get

Prof. Cameron's report and the Government looks at all those pieces of input till we make a decision about it."

Dr Konetschnik said the situation at Mersey mirrored a situation at South Australia's Modbury Hospital two years ago.

"In South Australia the government caved in on Healthscope and renegotiated the contract and that's really what Healthscope wants. They want more money, they don't want to run a service... and I suspect what they're doing at the moment is playing the Government as a fool and using politics to renegotiate the contract," he said.

"Modbury's settled down... I suspect it was the same problem. They took up a contract in the mid '90s but they couldn't make a profit off it, they miscalculated and then they pushed that government into changing the contract.

"Now, they came into the contract here knowing it was losing money, they knew that and even so they promised to maintain services. Now they've breached their promises."

Mr Llewellyn said these were the sorts of issues he would discuss with Prof.

Cameron.

Dr Konetschnik said earlier this year there was a white paper circulating in the high echelons of the health department suggesting that Burnie and Devonport hospitals be closed.

"(It suggested to) build another 100 beds on the end of Launceston (hospital) and close these two places and that would get rid of all their worries and difficulties. I don't see that as viable and it disappeared, the paper disappeared, so I suspect it was just mucking around."

Prof. Cameron's findings will be released on Wednesday.

Specialists are planning strike action at midnight on Wednesday if services are not restored and a public rally called by the Mersey Community Hospital Support Group will be held at 3 p.m. on Thursday at the Devonport Recreation Centre in Forbes St.