

Long waits push surgeries onto private list

EXCLUSIVE

SEAN PARNELL
HEALTH EDITOR

The long wait for hip and knee replacements and cataract surgery in the public hospital system is being used to justify those procedures being available only in top-level insurance policies, given patients already have a strong incentive to go private.

Under planned gold, silver, bronze and basic categories of insurance, to be introduced from April, tens of thousands of policies will be reorganised into comparable tiers, promising members greater transparency and the ability to shop around.

However, assigning clinical services to categories proved difficult and took longer than the federal government expected. With hospital coverage falling, and concerns over rising premiums, stakeholders

holders have also had to predict how members and prospective members will react to the changes.

Documents obtained by *The Australian* under freedom-of-information laws show waiting times for elective surgery in public hospitals have been factored into category design.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare this week revealed the average overall median waiting time for admission for elective surgery in 2017-18 was

40 days and increasing at a rate of two days a year.

Consultants engaged to model various category options told the Department of Health they had factored in "demand shifting from the public to private setting" but may have underestimated the potential in elective surgery.

Where people faced waiting more than a year in the public system, or an uninsured bill that would be higher than premiums over the same period, there was

greater incentive to take out insurance.

"Such consumers may warm to the option of purchasing a product for a particular service to avoid the public hospital waiting list," the consultants said, giving as examples hip and knee replacements and cataract surgery, which will be mandated only for gold-category policies.

With an ageing population, demand for cataract surgery is increasing and it is the most com-

mon elective procedure in the public system. So, too, is demand for hip and joint replacements.

According to the institute data, 1.9 per cent of people on the public list for cataract surgery wait more than 365 days, with 6 per cent of those on the list for hip replacements and 8.4 per cent of those on the list for knee replacements, also a consequence of rising obesity rates.

The consultants said that in 2016-17 the average charge for a

hip replacement was \$27,070 and for a knee replacement \$24,599.

"Both hip and knee replacements are good examples of treatments which have both long public waiting lists and treatment charges that are multiple times the typical cost of a single year's premium," the consultants said.

"Both of these effects will make private health insurance particularly appealing, and there may even be people who adversely select against the industry by dropping

their cover again once they have received their treatment. The financial sustainability of the private health insurance system is best managed by minimising such opportunities for gaming the system."

Health Minister Greg Hunt said the biggest driver of waiting times in the public sector was governments pursuing insured patients for the revenue, forcing those who cannot afford insurance and are "generally doing a lot tougher" to wait longer.

Namatjira has mastered art of not taking things too seriously

EXCLUSIVE

AMOS AIKMAN
NORTHERN CORRESPONDENT

It would be easy to place a crooked lens over Vincent Namatjira's art and cast him as another progressive or "minority" person angry at Donald Trump. But that's not what he wants.

"When I put a black person on the canvas with Trump I want to put a question mark in people's heads," Namatjira says.

"I use humour to take away some of their power, to show people my side."

The Arrente man and rising Red Centre artist, who has just become the first Aboriginal person to have a solo show at Florida's Art Basel Miami Beach, thinks "positively" of leaders such as North Korea's Kim Jong-un, although he also views him as dangerous.

"Putin reminds me of tjilpis (old men) back on the community," he says. "Most of them were cowboys."

Namatjira's latest collection, on show in association with Melbourne's This Is No Fantasy gallery, depicts Vladimir Putin shirtless on horseback, Trump of-



JACKSON LEE

Vincent Namatjira in his Iwantja Arts studio

fering the Queen McDonald's, himself and Trump, with a provocative "Make APY Great Again" carving-up a cake decorated with a map of the world.

Namatjira often places his subjects next to himself or out in the

Anangu, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Lands community of Indulkana where he lives.

"I'm holding the Aboriginal flag: these two presidents have come to Indulkana, but I'm here, and I've got the Aboriginal flag,

which is number one," he says of a work showing himself, Putin and Trump. "I just want people to know that indigenous people also look at world leaders ... I want to be recognised like my grandfather, Albert Namatjira."



Namatjira gives Kim Jong-un a trim

In Namatjira's mind, Trump may be "trying to change the world or whatever" but is still just "a funny bloke".

"When he talks, he does this strange thing with his lips, like he's going to kiss," Namatjira says.

"Trump is doing things his own way, sort of like I'm doing things my own way."

He sees Trump as someone who's too quickly judged, much as Aboriginal people are, in his view.

"They are world leaders, but I'm an indigenous leader for the younger generation. I do not want to judge them, and I do not want others judging me," he says.



Donald Trump and the Queen

"World leaders aren't just angels or devils; they're just men on an equal scale with the rest of the world. To me, we're all equal, and I just want to see people have fun."

Namatjira, who was taken into an institution at a young age, says the experience (including that of losing connection to his ancestral culture) shaped his outlook.

An Archibald Prize finalist, he has previously done reverent portraits of indigenous figureheads and seemingly mocking ones of modern Australian politicians. He has also tackled colonial personalities and Aboriginal admirers of the Sydney Opera House.

News of Kim Jong-un's nuclear warhead-testing scared many people on the APY lands because of memories of British nuclear testing at Maralinga.

"I want American people and Australian people to see that art can change things, can change lives. It has changed my life and taken me to places I've never been before," Namatjira says.

"I want people to see my paintings, smile and chuckle. Looking at my work, laughing about it, go ahead, because it makes me proud of who I am. I paint to have fun."

ARTS P17

Bali drug mule Lawrence will face charges

Bali Nine drug smuggler Renae Lawrence will face court in January on historical charges dating back to 2005, which are alleged to have occurred a month before she was arrested in Bali for drug smuggling.

The charges include stealing a car, driving unlicensed, speeding and failing to comply with police direction. Shortly after, Ms Lawrence was allegedly involved in a police chase on the NSW central coast.

Ms Lawrence, 41, handed herself in to Waratah Police Station last month after spending 13 years behind bars in a Bali. She was granted conditional bail. She did not appear in court yesterday.

Her lawyer, Drew Hamilton, told magistrate Andrew Eckholdt he had earlier contacted the court to have Ms Lawrence excused from attending. Mr Hamilton said there had been "meaningful discussions" with police and he asked for a four-to-six-week adjournment until after the Christmas break. NSW Police Commissioner Mick Fuller indicated that he would give Ms Lawrence time to settle back home.

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