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Funding crisis hits women's health

An emerging crisis in private maternity and gynaecology services, and the impact this is having on patients and health services, must be addressed immediately.

The President of the National Association of Specialist Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (NASOG), Dr Stephen Lane, said key data showed a decline in pregnancy and births in the private sector, a decline which correlates with insufficient financial support for such care by the Government and private health funds.

This reduction in private hospital obstetric births places increased strain on the public system. This strain may lead to shorter hospital stays, suboptimal staff to patient ratios and less initial support for new mothers.

Lactation support and strategies to increase maternal confidence and identify, treat and potentially reduce risks of postnatal depression may also be compromised by overburdening the public system.

Dr Lane's comments followed a conference at the weekend where NASOG was engaged in sessions on politics and the developing crisis facing women's health.

He said immediate and bipartisan support to address the issue of chronic under-funding in women's health was critical.

Dr Lane pointed to data showing 20,000 fewer births are occurring in private maternity units this year, compared to peak levels earlier this decade when Government rebates for private births were better, and patient out-of-pocket expenses were much lower.

Dr Lane said there has been a stable or reducing fee structure applied by most specialist obstetricians and gynaecologists despite a prolonged Medicare freeze, and removal of EMSN concessions for families accessing private obstetric care.

"It seems unlikely the new tiered private health insurance system will provide any real relief unless pregnancy is covered by Gold, Silver and Bronze policies," Dr Lane said.

"It is a concern that lesser policies exclude pregnancy and are of doubtful real value for women of child bearing age, given 50 per cent of all pregnancies are unplanned.

Dr Lane called on the Government and private health insurers to increase funding for obstetric and gynaecological patients to improve access to specialist care in private hospitals in Australia.

"History has proven that financial support directly increases affordability and uptake of private obstetric care," Dr Lane said.

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NASOG is Australia's professional body for Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

