

Plea for funds to sustain Servants Health Centre

Servants Health Centre in Princes St caters to some of the neediest people in Dunedin.

Two weeks ago, Servants Health Centre was in the news. The service it provides cannot continue beyond the next few years if current funding arrangements do not change.

The practice runs on the smell of an oily rag. A lot of the fixed equipment it uses was donated when the centre opened. The centre does not have enough income to cover modest administrative overheads, rent, heating and ongoing clinical costs.

Doctors and nurses at the centre are all volunteers. So they can't take salary cuts.

The medical staff at Servants make every taxpayer dollar stretch further than you would think possible.

Surely you would think funding the modest cost of their practice would be a priority in our health system. It seems not. The centre is threatened with closure because of a gap between costs and current funding.

The doctors and nurses at Servants typically work elsewhere and donate half a day per week to the centre. The practice as a whole has 500 patients on the books. The real need is much greater.

Because of increasing levels of poverty, unemployment and the low self-esteem this generates, it is



estimated that Servants is meeting less than a-quarter of the need it could meet if resources were available.

So what is going wrong? Firstly, it seems that the Servants' way of operating doesn't fit neatly with the current funding model. If it was dealing with cardiovascular disease, middle-class sexual health and diabetes checks, it would be better funded.

Nor is Servants focused on the issues of the worried well. Instead it is focused on the most needy, marginalised people — aged between 15 and 24, likely to be out of work, often with mental health issues and living in poverty. These are the patients who can't afford to attend other centres, and without Servants would not otherwise access primary care.

The question must be asked: what is the Government doing to support services like Servants Health Centre which practise holistic care and meet the needs of lower socioeconomic groups who can't pay for care?