

Government abolishes HealthQuest

Health assessments left in limbo.



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The NSW Cabinet has decided to close HealthQuest with effect from June 30.

HealthQuest closed its books on April 20 and will accept no further referrals from government agencies, including the Department of Education and Training.

On April 7 representatives of the Public Sector Workforce Office (PSWO), as part of its monthly consultation with public sector unions, advised that the NSW Government had decided to conduct a review of HealthQuest. The PSWO acts as the employer across the whole of the NSW public sector.

At the meeting the PSWO representatives indicated that, as a result of the review, the Government would in all likelihood wind back the operations of HealthQuest. It was a very quick review. On April 17 the staff at HealthQuest received letters advising of the decision to close HealthQuest.

The correspondence to staff advised that the June 30 closure was to enable appointments to be made for any referrals already received and reports to be written from the assessments arising from those appointments and the transfer of HealthQuest records to the Health Department.

A dispute notice was lodged on April 21 with the Industrial Relations Commission by Unions NSW in response to the NSW Government's decision to abolish HealthQuest. The matter was heard on April 24 before Justice Kavanagh. She was scathing of the advocates from the Health Department and the PSWO, due to their failure to provide any useful information on alternative arrangements for health assessments for public sector employees.

Justice Kavanagh has offered a report back for May 22 at which time the PSWO is to provide advice as to the interim arrangements

that have been put in place for both health assessments and an appeals process in relation to such assessments. In addition the PSWO is required to report back on long term arrangements to be put in place for both health assessments and appeals.

The parties were called upon to establish a committee as part of the reporting process to develop agreed procedures.

Subsequent to the hearing Unions NSW has suggested that there should be representatives from Unions NSW, the police (who have HealthQuest as the assessing body identified in their Death and Disability award), nurses, the Public Service Association and Federation. The majority of HealthQuest assessments and appeals are done on behalf of teachers.

At this stage there are no interim procedures to deal with assessments for matters such as applications for medical retirement. Indeed, at the time of writing the Department of Education and Training hadn't been informed of the Government's decision. The PSWO has suggested that agencies such as the Department might consider using doctors from the WorkCover approved list of medical practitioners. The idea that agencies would go shopping for doctors is unacceptable. Federation has written to the Department seeking an urgent meeting regarding interim procedures for dealing with health assessments particularly as they relate to possible medical retirements.

There are some people who will not be sad to see the end of HealthQuest. The majority of referrals to HealthQuest, however, are the result of requests for assessment from individual teachers seeking medical retirement. These teachers have been left in limbo by the Government's decision. Federation will provide information to members as soon as possible regarding interim arrangements for those teachers seeking medical retirement