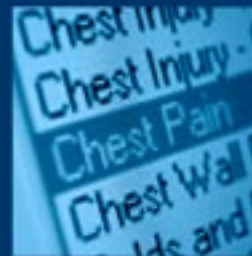




Innovative solutions in *After Hours General Practice.*





*GP Assist (Tasmania) is funded
by the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing.*



...fully integrated after hours care

INTRODUCTION

GP Assist (Tasmania) is an innovative service which is delivering the most progressive After Hours General Practice solution in Australia. GP Assist provides after hours support to rural General Practitioners (GPs), to encourage them to work and stay in country areas.

GP Assist involves a team of nurses and doctors working together throughout the entire after hours period to provide guidance and advice by phone to patients from all over Tasmania. By combining their professional skills with advanced information technology, the care of patients can be ensured, usually without disturbing the local GP. Nevertheless, under GP Assist arrangements, local face-to-face medical attention can still be arranged if necessary.

However sophisticated, telephone advice and information technology can only play a part in delivering medical care – they can never replace the essential services which are provided by nurses and doctors in clinics, emergency departments and patients' homes.

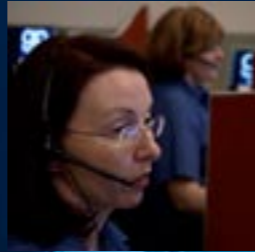
To ensure a comprehensive approach to after hours care, GP Assist is closely integrated with a wide range of face-to-face health care providers.

In rural areas of Tasmania, GP Assist works closely with country practices, GP cooperatives and community hospitals. In Hobart, GP Assist works in conjunction with After Hours Doctor, a dedicated after hours clinic and home visiting service, which operates on behalf of urban GPs.

After Hours Doctor provides a complete package of after hours care for the patients of GPs in Hobart. This service results in a major reduction in patients attending the Emergency Department of the Royal Hobart Hospital. Information about After Hours Doctor, and its significant contribution to local health services in Southern Tasmania, is also described in this booklet.

Working together, GP Assist, rural GPs, and the After Hours Doctor in Hobart, combine to deliver more effective, efficient and accessible after hours services across the State of Tasmania.

This model of cooperation is leading the way in the provision of after hours care and mirrors the direction that after hours care in the UK is taking with the reshaping of "NHS Direct" (their national health call centre).



It's late at night. A mother in a country town is worried about her 8 year old daughter's earache. She needs advice but it's late and she doesn't want to bother her doctor.

She reluctantly rings her local surgery where the call is diverted to the GP Assist nurse triage centre. A registered nurse answers and with the help of 'Teleguides'TM (clinical decision-support software) she is able to offer advice and reassure the worried mother. The mother is told to call back at any time during the night if the child becomes more unwell.

The rural GP remains undisturbed overnight and receives a report on arrival at his clinic the following morning.



...80 % reduction in after hours workload for rural GPs without compromising patient care

OVERVIEW

GPs, especially in rural and regional areas, are in short supply and often overworked. There is good evidence to show that the pressure of after hours work on GPs and their families is a key reason for doctors leaving rural areas.

Nevertheless, GPs say that they do not mind being disturbed after hours – as long as it is for an urgent medical reason. Understandably, patients can not always tell if their problem is a serious one which requires immediate attention, or one which can wait until the next day, or even be managed simply at home. So access to prompt medical advice is essential for patients. It is also important that patients are not discouraged from seeking that advice because they “don't want to bother their doctor”.

GP Assist allows GPs to divert their after hours calls to its dedicated triage centre. A registered nurse, using decision-support software and assisted where necessary by an experienced 'after hours triage doctor', advises the patient on the best course of action for their problem. If it is decided that the patient needs to be seen, the 'triage doctor' contacts their local on-call GP personally to refer the case.

Experience has shown that more than 80% of calls can be handled by GP Assist without disturbing the local GP – significantly reducing the burden of after hours work for the rural GP.

GPs are free to divert their calls to GP Assist as and when they please. This leaves them in complete control of their patients' after hours care. GP Assist acknowledges the GPs' independence and authority and works to handle patient calls in the way that each GP prefers.



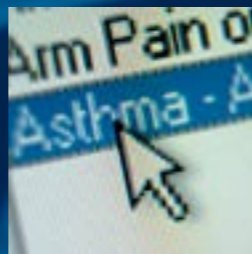
An aunt is concerned about her 13 year old nephew who is holidaying with her. His recent cold has become worse and has typically aggravated his asthma.

She calls her local GP and her call is diverted to the GP Assist triage centre.

The nurse at GP Assist assesses the case, provides advice and on this occasion arranges for the triage doctor to call the aunt back.

The triage doctor speaks with the aunt and nephew, advises on further treatment measures and instructs them to ring back in 20 minutes, or if necessary sooner, on his direct number.

Since the patient's wheeze has completely settled, the triage doctor decides to continue to review the situation throughout the rest of the after hours period and the local on-call GP is not disturbed.



...practical application of information technology with an integrated service response

HOW DOES IT WORK ?

GPs typically provide after hours patient care either alone or through a cooperative arrangement with other doctors. Their patients are given an after hours number to ring.

When GPs use GP Assist, after hours patient calls are diverted or re-directed, at local call cost, to a 1300 number.

If the problem is life-threatening, the nurse immediately transfers the caller to the Ambulance Service by a 3-way 'conference call'. Otherwise, the nurse creates a medical record, assesses the problem with the help of decision-support software (Teleguides™), and provides advice. If the nurse concludes that further medical assessment is needed, the call is transmitted to a GP Assist 'triage doctor'.

The triage doctor (who is alerted by an SMS message) then continues the consultation, accessing and appending the clinical record with the use of a laptop computer via secure internet access (VPN). This technology allows triage doctors to work with GP Assist from any location.

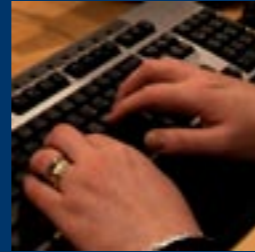
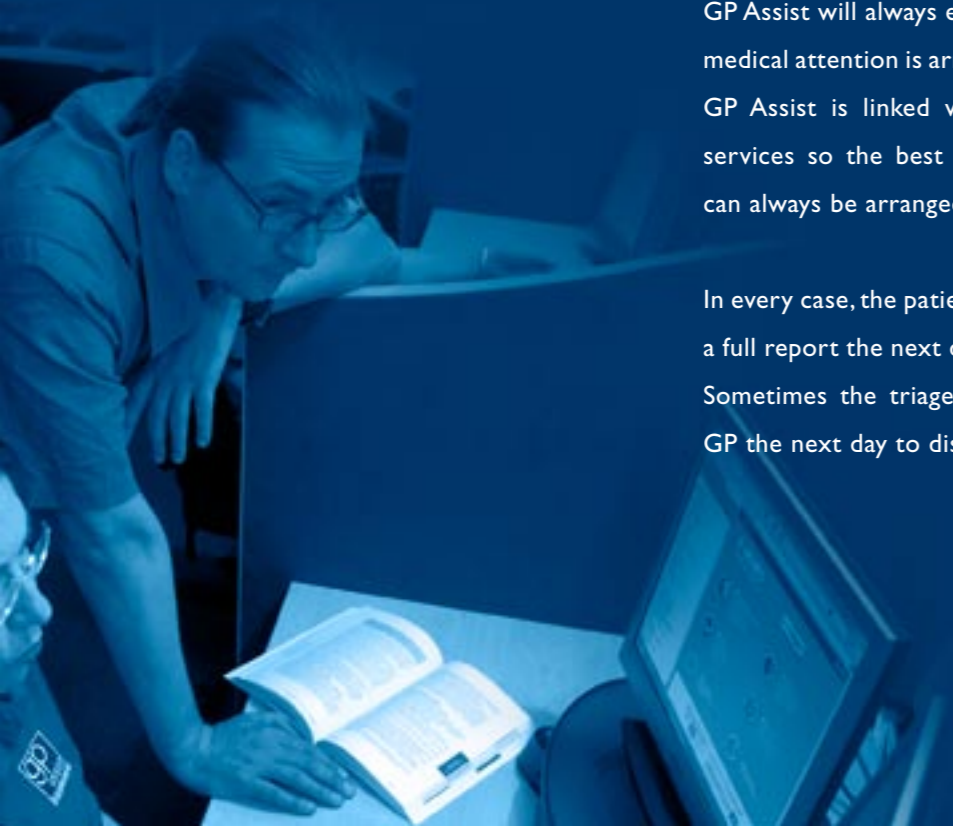
An additional interactive web-based database provides secure information about local on-call GP rosters, accessible pharmacies, domiciliary nursing and other allied health care services.

By the end of the call the nurse and, where necessary, the triage doctor will have advised the patient on the best course of action. This may include arranging a prescription or organising nursing or other allied health care services.

Rural on-call GPs are only contacted by the triage doctor when local patient care before the next working day is required.

Nurses and triage doctors will often contact the patient later to review their condition, and patients are always encouraged to call back directly at any time if worse or worried.





GP Assist does not replace the need for doctors to be on-call in the community, but by ‘filtering’ calls which are already destined for the rural GP it works to reduce the burden of after hours work.

Should the GP Assist triage doctor decide that local care is necessary for that patient before the next working day, the local on-call GP is notified. The local GP then deals with the call just as if he had received it in the first place.

If the local GP is temporarily unavailable, GP Assist will always ensure that alternative medical attention is arranged when required. GP Assist is linked with a range of local services so the best available patient care can always be arranged.

In every case, the patient’s usual GP receives a full report the next day about the episode. Sometimes the triage doctor will ring the GP the next day to discuss the case.



...supports scarce after hours resources

WHY IS GP ASSIST DIFFERENT TO OTHER HEALTH CALL CENTRES?

Some health call centres, just using nurses, have already been introduced in other parts of Australia, but generally these work independently – they do not work with General Practice – and they advertise to attract calls.

GP Assist does not advertise to patients publicly – GPs provide their patients with information about the after hours services their practice provides and diversion of calls to GP Assist is entirely under the GP’s control.

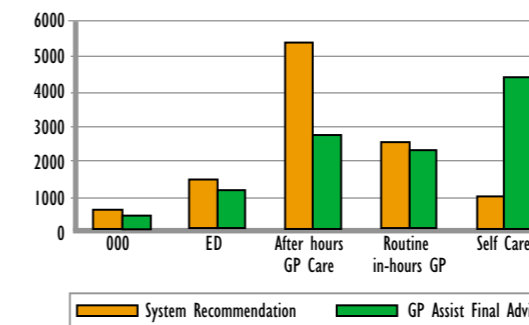
Also, the decision support software used by health call centres has a tendency to be conservative and recommend face-to-face care.

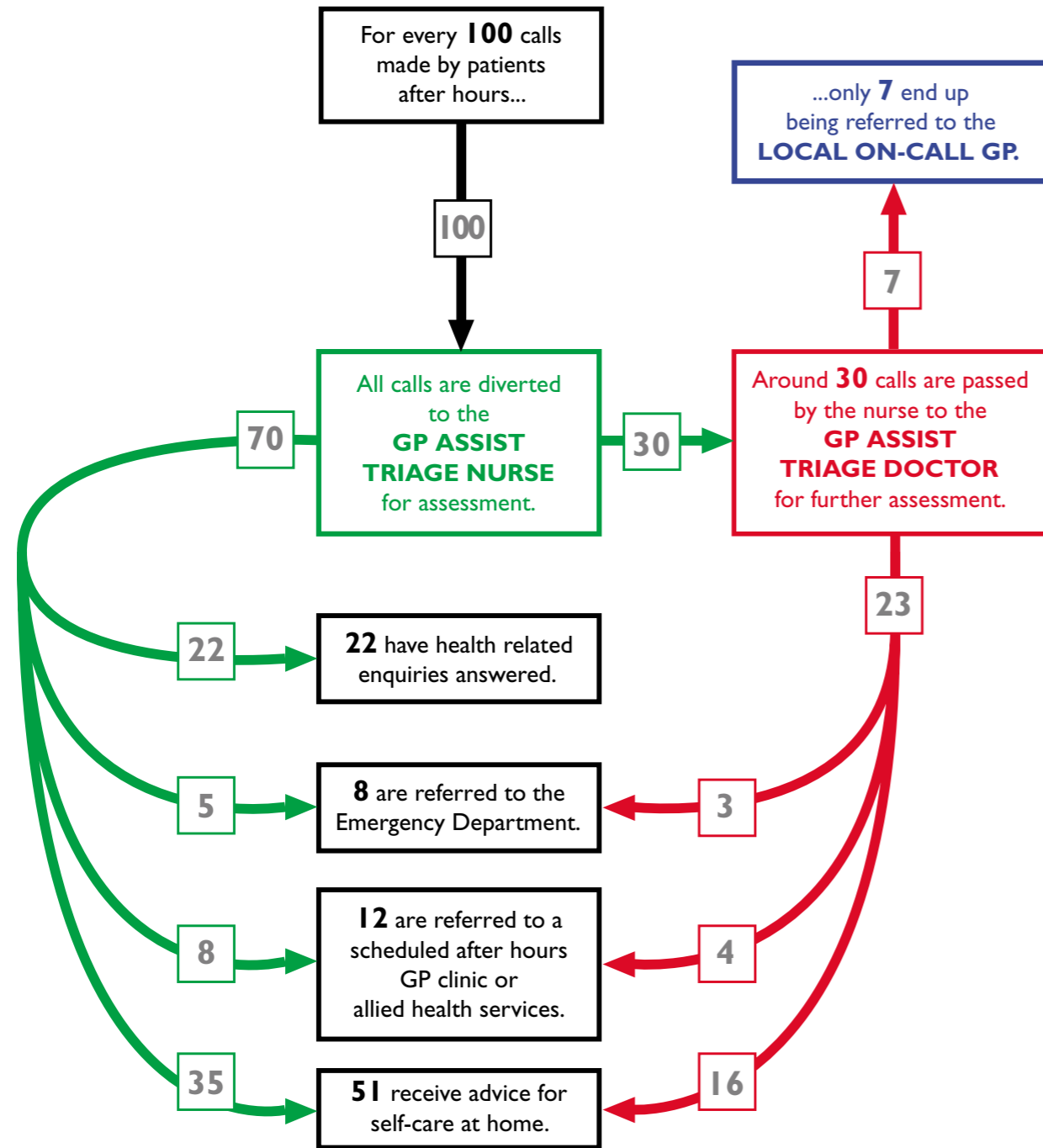
This can result in more patients being re-directed, often to services which are already busy and not integrated with the health call centre’s operation or the patient’s own GP.

However, when combined with the support and assessment by triage doctors under the GP Assist model, the number of calls referred for face-to face care during the after hours period is substantially reduced. This is illustrated below.

And in contrast to some health call centres, under GP Assist the recommended course of action is always directly arranged for the patient. No-one is just advised to “see a doctor”.

Final Advice vs System Recommendation





...triage doctors can arrange services which nurses can not

IMPACT

A diagram illustrating the way an average 100 calls are handled by GP Assist is shown opposite.

Before GP Assist, all these calls would have been answered by local on-call GPs – an unreasonable burden after a busy working day.

As the diagram shows, calls are now diverted to **GP Assist** where they are answered by the **Triage Nurse**. The nurse will be able to provide advice to the patient in 70% of cases.

Those calls which the nurse decides will require further medical assessment (30%) are passed to the **GP Assist Triage Doctor** who then consults with the patient and finally determines the best course of action. In some instances (less than 10% of all calls) this may involve referring the patient back to the **local on-call GP** for face-to-face care.

If triage doctors are not directly involved in the health call centre assessment process, unscheduled after hours referrals to local on-call GPs would be four to five times higher.

Over half of those patients referred by the Triage Doctor to 'self care' receive services which nurses alone can not provide, e.g., arranging a prescription, advising on the use of medication, interpreting pathology results, managing statutory processes in relation to patient deaths, or even conferring with a specialist.

Importantly, all calls received from health care professionals, such as Ambulance Officers, or nurses in Residential Aged Care Facilities, community hospitals or domiciliary teams, are passed directly to the triage doctor, by-passing the nurse assessment process.

...significant savings to Medicare



In the early hours of the morning a man develops increasing chest discomfort and breathlessness. His anxious wife rings their GP and the call is automatically diverted to GP Assist.

The registered nurse on duty at GP Assist promptly assesses the symptoms and recognising the urgency of the situation, 'conference calls' (3-way conversation) through to the Ambulance Service. An ambulance is dispatched.

In some rural communities the local GP is also notified immediately by the nurse, since the GP may be able to attend before the Ambulance arrives.

FUNDING

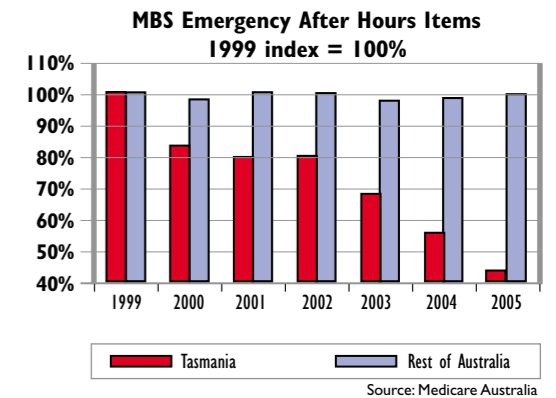
GP Assist is funded by the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) as a free service to rural GPs and their patients. Telephone advice is not covered by the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS).

Despite its small scale and enhanced integration, GP Assist provides nurse triage at no greater cost per call than larger health call centres elsewhere in Australia.

Since the introduction of the GP Assist trial of integrated telephone advice in 1999, the number of emergency after hours MBS Items of service across Tasmania has fallen dramatically (shown below). The resulting savings, amounting to around \$1.3 million annually, significantly offset the costs of doctor triage under the GP Assist model - which also results in less redirection of patients, duplication of services, and rural GP disturbance.

GP Assist requires the triage services of only one doctor, except on weekend days and public holidays when two triage doctors work. Nurse staffing levels range from three at peak times to just one overnight.

Doctors providing telephone advice through GP Assist receive equivalent remuneration to that which they would receive delivering after hours home visits within an urban medical deputising setting - whilst ensuring a faster and more appropriate response for patients.





An arrangement which uses the services of a small team of nurses and doctors to handle the majority of after hours telephone calls to GPs statewide, is clearly more logical, cost-effective and efficient.

GP Assist is presently handling over 70,000 calls per annum. The service provides support for patients of over 80% of GPs in Tasmania.

Since the start of funding in 1999, GP participation has continued to grow, stakeholder support remains strong, and GP and patient satisfaction is high.



...effective, efficient, and accessible care

SUSTAINABILITY

As with any health care initiative, GP Assist's 'sustainability' can only be judged according to the balance of costs and benefits.

The financial costs of GP Assist are significantly offset by the reduction in the number of MBS Emergency After Hours Items charged in Tasmania. This amount alone justifies the cost of engaging medical practitioners in the triage role, a feature which is unique to this service and which makes it so effective.

The cost of the nurse triage component (based on crude costs per call) is lower than most other health call centres. Furthermore, because calls are not attracted by public advertising but are directly diverted from GPs, GP Assist deals with calls that are likely to have a greater degree of medical urgency.

The reduction in patient referrals for immediate 'face to face' care makes it more efficient than an ordinary call centre.

For patients, the service provides immediately accessible advice and, where necessary, a response which is fully integrated with available medical services. From their contact with GP Assist their clinical management is arranged seamlessly. This access and integration offers an equitable response across all patient groups.

But the major benefit of this service is the workforce support it provides for those Tasmanian rural GPs who opt to use it. According to rural GPs, GP Assist has reduced their after hours workload by as much as 80%, and has encouraged them to stay in rural practice - a community benefit which is financially incalculable.

afterhoursdoctor

clinic hours

monday to friday
6pm to 10pm

weekends & public holidays
9am to 10pm

afterhoursdoctor

...a dedicated after hours general practice

AFTER HOURS DOCTOR - OVERVIEW

Whereas rural GPs throughout the state are always needed to provide face to face care in country areas, a city the size of Hobart allows for a dedicated after hours clinic.

After Hours Doctor is a comprehensive After Hours General Practice which has been in operation since 1987 and is accredited as a Medical Deputising Service.

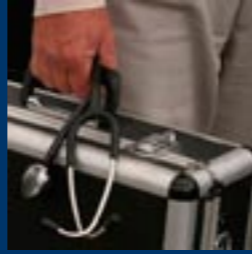
After Hours Doctor provides after-hours care on behalf of the 85% of Hobart GPs who choose to "contract out" their after hours responsibilities. It provides both clinic and home visiting services.

Well located for access by patients, the After Hours Doctor clinic is situated in the northern suburbs of Hobart, about 10 minutes from the city centre.

The purpose-built and well-equipped clinic is open from 9:00 am – 10:00 pm on Saturdays, Sundays and Public Holidays, and every weeknight from 6:00 pm – 10:00 pm. It includes a minor procedures room, on-site X-ray and continuous access to pathology. An extended hours pharmacy is located directly opposite the clinic.

After Hours Doctor works closely with GP Assist and shares a medical workforce.





*...19 years operation
without government subsidy*

In addition to the clinic, the *After Hours Doctor* also provides home visits throughout the whole of the after hours period, including overnight. These are generally reserved for residents of Aged Care Facilities or those who are housebound by virtue of their illness, age or social circumstances.

All calls requesting home visits are first triaged by GP Assist in order to ensure that these valuable services are appropriately targeted.

The '*After Hours Doctor*' provides approximately 800 visits per year, thereby guaranteeing prompt care to those for whom clinic attendance is impractical or medically inappropriate.

FUNDING

The After Hours Doctor receives income from two sources - a subscription paid by GPs contracting the service (which is broadly equivalent to the first tier of the Practice Incentives Payment) and a percentage of patient fees generated by the doctors working in its clinic.

After Hours Doctor is one of only a handful of accredited after hours services in Australia which operates a clinic, and has provided 19 years uninterrupted service to Hobart GPs and their patients without any direct Government subsidy.

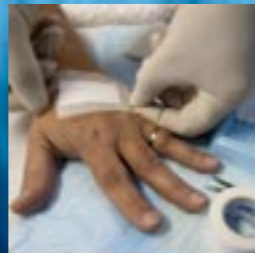
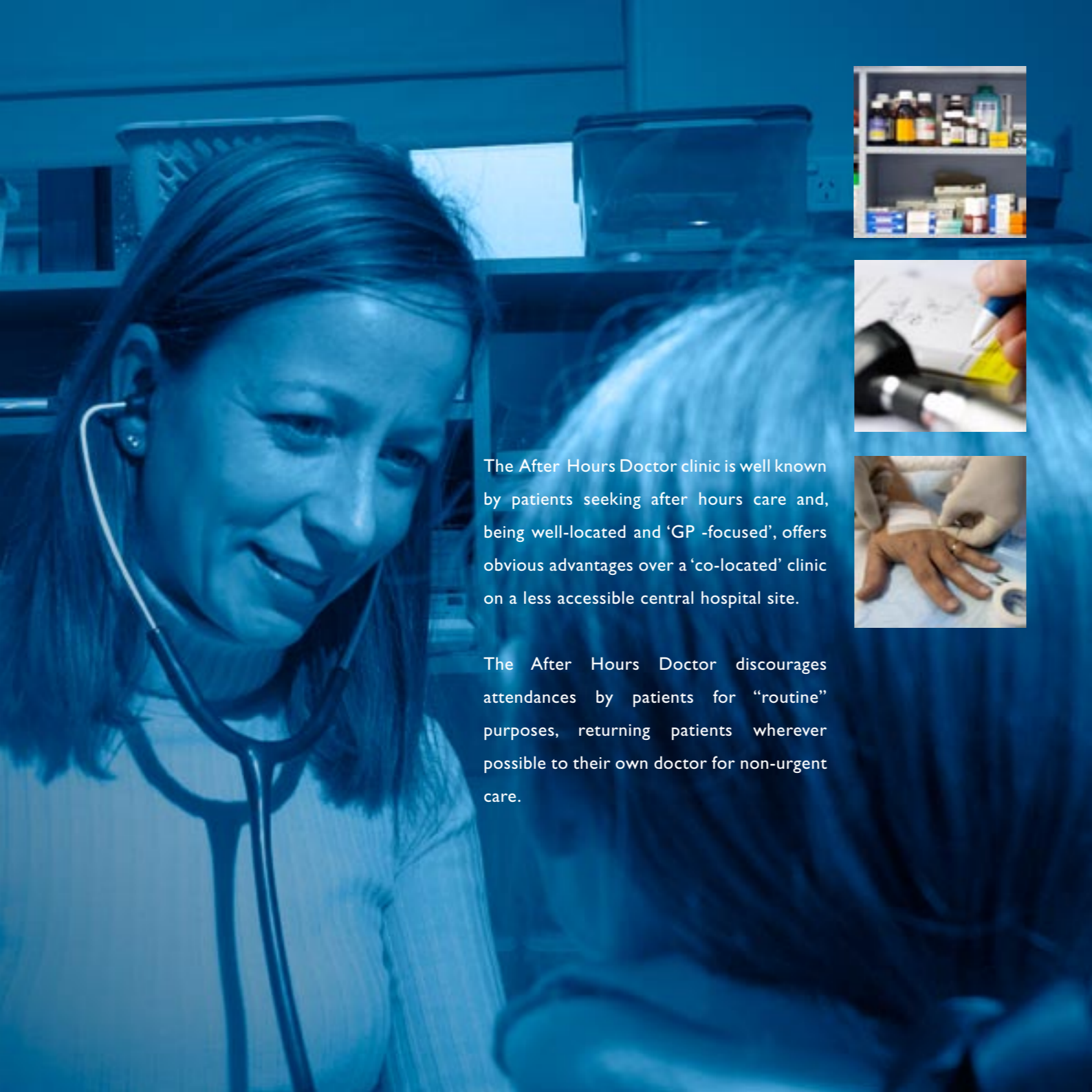
Most independent after hours services rely on providing home visits only, since the revenue from after hours clinic services has, until recently, been insufficient to fund their substantial overheads. This has been shown by recent GP Divisional and trial initiatives, which have required subsidies. The After Hours Doctor has succeeded for a number of reasons:

The right scale – whilst 75% of patients are bulk-billed, the After Hours Doctor sees sufficient patients to meet its overheads and provide an adequate financial return to doctors working with the service.

A dedicated workforce – the After Hours Doctor has a “core staff ” of around 8 doctors who are solely committed to providing after hours care. This underpins the dependability of the service and fosters a specialised interest in after hours care.

Professional satisfaction – Doctors working with After Hours Doctor also work with GP Assist, at different times. Alternating the triage role with the traditional clinical role, offers a rewarding mix of work for the doctors. This has helped attract and retain a dedicated, high quality medical workforce with high morale.

Needs based - After Hours Doctor has evolved from the needs of local GPs who have always supported the service.



The After Hours Doctor clinic is well known by patients seeking after hours care and, being well-located and 'GP -focused', offers obvious advantages over a 'co-located' clinic on a less accessible central hospital site.

The After Hours Doctor discourages attendances by patients for "routine" purposes, returning patients wherever possible to their own doctor for non-urgent care.



...lowest ED attendance rates of any state

IMPACT ON PUBLIC EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

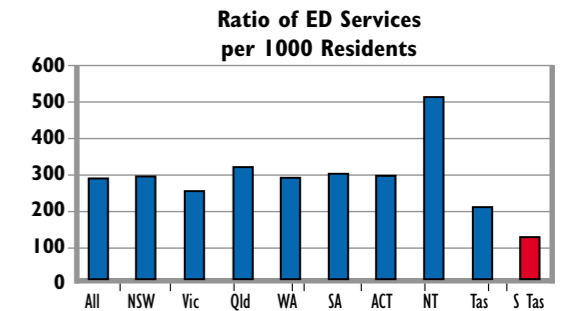
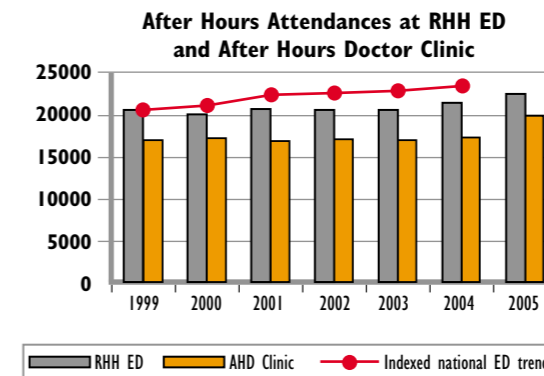
The After Hours Doctor clinic offers an efficient way of attending patients and now treats around 20,000 patients a year. This is close to the number seen by the Royal Hobart Hospital Emergency Department after hours, shown below (left).

Attendances at the Emergency Department (ED) of the Royal Hobart Hospital have grown at less than the national rate.

A recent rise in ED attendances (which is not due to a significant increase in NTS Categories 4 & 5) is smaller than the rise in patient numbers seen at the After Hours Doctor clinic.

The graph below (right) compares ED attendance rates elsewhere in Australia.

By government estimates the average cost of seeing a non-admitted Category 4 or 5 patient in an Emergency Department is in the range of \$174 - \$231, so the resulting savings to the State Hospital system amount to millions of dollars.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2004

In an Aged Care Home, a nurse attends an elderly lady who has suddenly become unwell.

She decides that medical advice is required and therefore rings the GP Assist dedicated aged care telephone number. The nurse speaks directly to the triage doctor with whom she discusses the case. The triage doctor provides advice and prescribes medication.

The triage doctor later calls back to review the patient's progress and decides that it is necessary to notify the patient's local GP, or in Hobart arrange a visit from the After Hours Doctor.



... enhanced support for a range of other health service providers

WORKING TOGETHER - THE FUTURE

Working together, GP Assist and After Hours Doctor combine to facilitate more effective, efficient and accessible after hours services across the State of Tasmania.

They continue to explore ways of better managing the challenges of after hours care for the benefit of patients, doctors and the health care system.

These include:-

- developing a data link with the Tasmanian Ambulance Service to allow the direct exchange of clinical information;
- improving existing integration with rural community hospitals and public hospital emergency rooms;
- developing secure electronic access to, and exchange of, patient information between clinical providers, particularly in Residential Aged Care Facilities;
- providing other telephone advice lines - such as the Tasmanian Parenting Information Line already operated by GP Assist;
- improving the management of chronic disease through home monitoring;
- introducing remote video links to enhance patient assessment;
- developing standards and educational tools for nurse and doctor triage;
- benchmarking performance indicators to better inform after hours policy development;
- further developing teaching links with the University of Tasmania School of Medicine.



CONTACTS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

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The logo for After Hours Doctor consists of a solid orange square with the text 'afterhoursdoctor' in white, lowercase, sans-serif font positioned at the bottom left of the square.

afterhoursdoctor

Dr John Davis and Dr David Law, the principals of GP Assist and After Hours Doctor, have been engaged full-time in administering and providing after hours care for over 15 years.