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Australia's private hospital capacity joins the COVID-19 fight

A new partnership with the Commonwealth Government will guarantee the viability of Australia's private hospital sector, ensuring its full capacity is available for the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Health Minister Greg Hunt announced the agreement today, saying the Commonwealth would underwrite private hospitals to keep them open, clinicians employed and high quality private hospital care available to Australians.

Australian Private Hospital Association (APHA) CEO Michael Roff welcomed the move, saying it gave the sector some certainty in challenging times.

"This is about private hospitals stepping up to the plate and doing whatever is required to help the country get through this pandemic.

"We have heard the word unprecedented a lot in the past few months, and what private hospitals are agreeing to here is unprecedented."

Mr Roff said hospital capacity would be offered under a cost recovery basis so the 657 hospitals, 35,000 beds, 100,000 staff including 57,000 nurses are available and integrated into the pandemic response to create one health system devoted to that response – that is the number one goal of this deal.

He said the deal also means there will be a private hospital system on the other side of the crisis.

"While the health system responds to the pandemic, a lot of what it normally does must be deferred. When the pandemic is over, we are going to need all of the capacity of the private hospital system to deal with the backlog of essential surgery. This deal means the private hospital system will be there to address that backlog.

"This is definitely not business as usual and everybody working in the health system needs to understand that what they were doing three or four weeks ago is not what they will be doing in three or four weeks' time.

"The states and territories now need to urgently finalise deals with private hospitals. We think the Victorian proposal provides a good model that could be picked up by other states to ensure there is no delay in reaching agreements," he said.

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The Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) is the peak industry body representing the private hospital and day surgery sector. The private hospital sector treats 4.5 million patients a year, including treatment of a third of chemotherapy, 60 percent of all surgery, 74 percent of all elective musculoskeletal surgery and 80 percent of rehabilitation.