

Patient care at risk from delays to Ryde centre

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HEALTH

THE head of the state's biggest injury rehabilitation centre has accused the Health Department of trying to destroy it by slashing funding and playing political games at the cost of patient welfare.

Funding for the Royal Rehabilitation Centre in Ryde, which treats people with severe burns, brain and spinal injuries, has been cut by more than a quarter in one year, its chief executive, Stephen Lowndes said yesterday. This will cause "serious liquidation issues" and put a planned 60-bed redevelopment in jeopardy, he said.

A \$50 million upgrade of the centre, which is a not-for-profit charity, had been in the pipeline for five years. It was to include a new accommodation block for 32 patients too badly injured to live in the community, a childcare centre for children with special needs, wetlands and a community centre, Mr Lowndes said.

It would also include a specialist 20-bed brain injury centre, the first of its kind in Australia.

But the plan is under threat because funding cuts coincided with Ryde Council delaying its

decision to grant permission for a developer to buy 12 hectares of the site, despite approval already having been granted by two former planning ministers, Frank Sartor and Kristina Keneally.

Frasers Property Australia had agreed to pay \$82 million for the land and wanted to start work constructing 790 dwellings within months but the delay was leading to cash-flow problems, Mr Lowndes said.

"We've already been given approval so it seems there are political reasons why the council would try and hold this up," he said.

"If we don't get that money by August, we're in a very tenuous position. We're under real duress and we cannot go ahead with the redevelopment."

In October last year, the state government announced it was hiving off 30 of the 60 proposed beds, funded solely by the Royal Rehabilitation Centre, and moving them to a new facility at Ryde Hospital, after it made more than \$35 million from the sale of the former Graythwaite convalescent home.

The sale was expected to raise only about \$22 million but a Supreme Court ruling insisted the entire \$35 million be spent on rehabilitation services at Ryde Hospital.

"The problem is that it is not

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Stephen Lowndes, Royal Rehabilitation Centre

economically viable to run less than 60 beds, so it leaves us in a difficult position," Mr Lowndes said.

"We not against developing Ryde Hospital but it should not be done at our expense or the expense of our very vulnerable patients."

In a letter to Ms Keneally last month, Mr Lowndes said it was "unfathomable" that NSW Health would "seek to destroy those specialist agencies such as Royal Rehab".

"We cannot continue to permit [NSW Health] to unilaterally reduce our recurrent funding to levels below the reasonable cost of service delivery or to make unilateral decisions to terminate our services," he wrote.

"Our existence is threatened by the very department that we should be partnering with to deliver first-class health care to the citizens of NSW ... it is a perfect example of the very poor health administration that the federal government has expressed its resolve to address."

He had asked for an urgent meeting with Ms Keneally in order to secure a stay of execution on the decision to shift 30 beds, a guarantee of "reasonable funding" and long-term security.