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South Australian Health Unions Highlight Healthcare Woes During Government Pay Negotiations

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Health unions in South Australia (SA) are amplifying concerns about the state's strained healthcare system as they negotiate wages with the government. From ambulance ramping to staffing shortages, unions argue that low pay and poor conditions are driving professionals away, risking patient safety. This article delves into the unions' grievances and the government's response, highlighting the broader implications for SA's healthcare.

The Health Services Union (HSU) and other health unions, representing doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals, have rejected recent pay offers, citing inadequate wages that fail to address the rising cost of living. HSU SA/NT branch secretary Billy Elrick emphasized that allied health professionals, like physiotherapists and radiographers, are paid up to 40% less than interstate counterparts, prompting many to leave SA. “These clinicians have never taken this sort of industrial action before. The fact that they are now shows how desperate the situation has become,” Elrick said. This exodus exacerbates staffing shortages, with 86.4% of health workers reporting safety risks due to understaffing, according to an HSU survey.

Ambulance ramping, where patients wait in ambulances due to hospital bed shortages, remains a critical issue. Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) SA branch secretary Leah Dabars has criticized the government’s inaction, stating, “We are sick and tired of being placated.” Despite months of behind-the-scenes talks, unions report little progress, with “internal ramping” now common as patients are treated in makeshift areas. Health Minister Chris Picton dismissed the term “internal ramping,” calling it union rhetoric, while SA Health defends using alternative spaces as standard practice. This disconnect fuels union frustration, with some, like the Australian Salaried Medical Officers’ Federation (ASMOF), considering strike action if negotiations stall further.

The government’s focus on pay talks has not quelled union demands for systemic reform. With SA’s healthcare system under pressure from chronic underfunding and an overworked workforce, unions argue that fair wages are essential to retain staff and ensure quality care. As negotiations continue, the public watches closely, wary of a system where budget priorities seem to overshadow patient and worker needs.

Will the government address these concerns, or will SA's healthcare crisis deepen?