

EDITORIAL

Here's to our very good health, from a bloke with a bit of ticker



KEVIN Rudd recently had his annual health check-up. "It's all good," the Prime Minister reports as he sits eating chocolate cake with the *Herald Sun* in his small study at The Lodge in Canberra.

What about his heart? Before the last election it was revealed Rudd had his aortic valve replaced 15 years ago with a donated human organ to fix a problem caused by rheumatic fever as a child.

His enemies tried to suggest he might not have the ticker to run the country, but he walked the Kokoda Track with no problems and he says his ticker is keeping good time.

"It's fine and dandy and, on last reports, contrary to rumours to the contrary, I still have a heart," he quips.

Dr Rudd has been doing his own diagnosis of the health system and the prognosis is not good. The patient is haemorrhaging money and badly needs a transfusion of cash. Not a one-off donation from the Treasury blood bank. This needs to be a permanent transplant.

Canberra wants to take over from the states as the dominant funder of the nation's hospitals. It will pay 60 per cent of the running costs, new buildings, training and research. At present, Canberra pays 35 per cent.

Rudd's plan is to take 33 per cent of

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the GST money from the states and puts it all in a giant pot to be called the National Health and Hospitals Network.

The states are expected to also put their share into the pot. The new network will fund groups of up to five hospitals and pay them per operation or medical procedure. An independent umpire will decide the going price for a hip operation or aortic valve transplant.

The states see Rudd as some modern Frankenstein who wants to create a monster.

Victoria has the best hospital system and already has much of the Rudd plan in place. Yet Victoria is the fiercest opponent, and the war of words between Rudd and John Brumby is getting very personal. Their relationship is strained. Brumby suggests giving Victoria an extra \$1 billion a year so it can cut its waiting lists by tens of thousands.

Victoria understandably fears its hospitals will be dragged down by a national system aiming to prop up basket cases in New South Wales and Queensland.

Rudd went to Sunshine Hospital on Saturday and found urgent surgeries being cancelled. He is prepared to go to a lot more Victorian hospitals.

Is this a pantomime by the leaders to look tough in an election year?

One person who knows them well thinks it's more likely two "A-type personalities" wanting control.

Rudd has cast himself as the saviour who will strip away the waste, duplication and blame-shifting between Canberra and the states.

He believes proper funding will cut waiting times for elective surgery and in emergency departments.

The health bill is soaring. Rudd says in 20 years this will leave the states unable to pay their health costs and no money for roads, police and schools. He is offering to take control of the financial time bomb.

The states think it sounds too good to be true and quite rightly want Rudd and Nicola Roxon to cough up more detail.

Among the questions are: how will

Canberra decide whether to fund a new hospital in Bendigo or Brisbane? What real guarantees will stop small country hospitals closing? Who decides the price of operations and how will they do it? How will more doctors and nurses be found? Will there really be aged care beds for the hundreds of older Australians currently taking up a hospital bed?

Rudd has already given the states extra health money and commissioned a high-powered inquiry that found the system is at tipping point. Rudd and Roxon then visited 103 of the 750 hospitals around the country. Rudd personally went to more than 20 to chat with doctors, nurses,

patients and administrators. It's something he has been doing his whole life. When he was 11 his father was in a car accident and Rudd and his mother would travel from the country to Brisbane to visit Bert, who died in the Royal Brisbane Hospital. To this day it's unclear whether Bert picked up an all-too-common hospital infection.

Young Kevin got a first-hand look at

what he describes as the "pretty thin" services and conditions, and how doctors and nurses "were doing their absolute best with very little to rely upon".

Rudd also has "decades and decades" of information about what goes on inside hospitals — his mother, sister, brother and sister-in-law are nurses.

Plus, he spent a year in a range of jobs — including cleaning toilets — at a Sydney hospital.

"I was responsible for rolling a defibrillator around a hospital as a wardman at the age of 17, trying to work out where it should be plugged in," he recalls.

Rudd probably has more experience with hospitals than other polities and it brings a personal touch to his determination. But he insists his experiences are, sadly, not unique.

Rudd has to win over the states and the Senate. Tony Abbott looks set to oppose the plan, leaving the PM needing the support of the five Greens plus Steve Fielding and Nick Xenophon.

So far Rudd has tried blasting critics out of the way, but it may take a more gentle bedside manner for this delicate operation to be a success.

Phillip Hudson is national political editor of the *Herald Sun*

Cash flow: the PM wants Canberra to be the major funder of our hospitals.

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