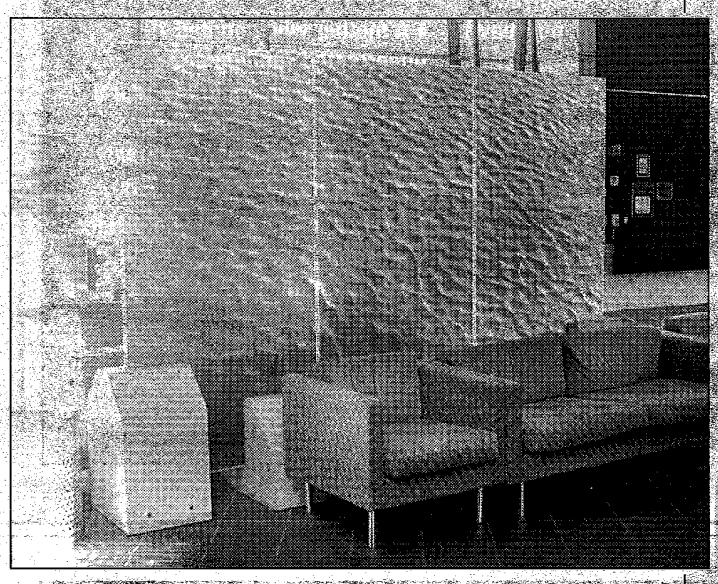
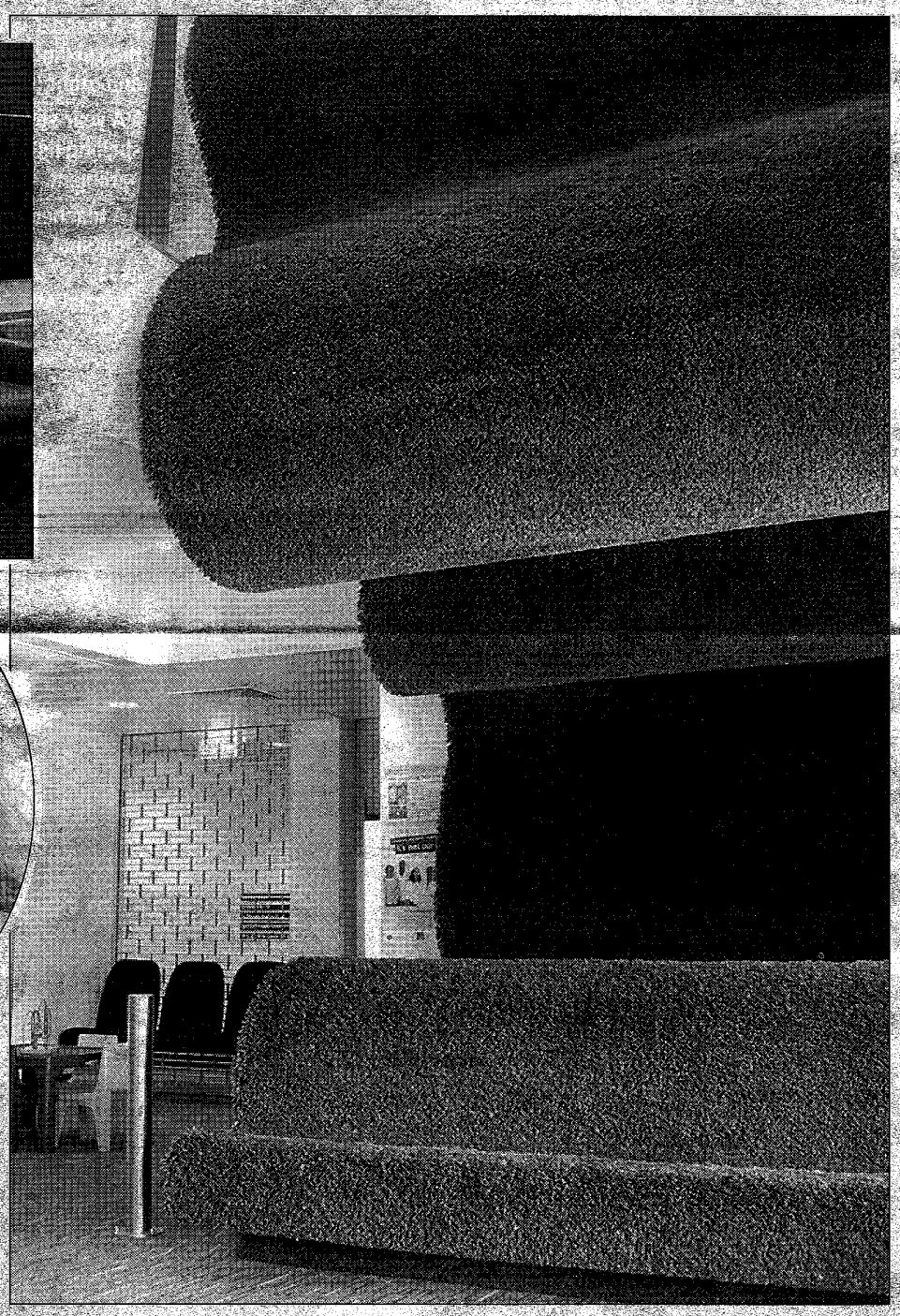
'This is a luxury we can't afford . . . if we want to look at sculptures we'll visit the art museum'

Row over cash for hospital art





SPECIAL REPORT

By DARRELL GILES
political editor

THE State Government has defended spending millions of dollars on art to decorate Queensland hospitals and clinics.

The Government's own figures reveal it has splurged $2.6 million in the past five years on paintings, sculptures and exhibitions in Queensland Health buildings.

This is enough, say medical experts, to pay for much-needed new doctors and nurses, life-saving medical equipment and help cut massive waiting lists.

Among the items taxpayers have funded is a $65,000 glass screen depicting images of the ocean that has been erected in Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital foyer. It is supposed to calm anxious patients awaiting treatment.

Another $30,000 was spent on a combined seating, sculpture and children's play area in the foyer of Logan Community Health Centre, south of Brisbane. It resembles a giant pile of shaggy green carpet.

The art was bought under the Art Built-In policy, introduced in 1999, which dictates that a maximum 2 per cent of spending on public capital works goes to art.

But critics want the Government to scrap the program when it comes to the Health Department.

"It's a luxury we can't afford," Bundaberg Victims Support Group spokeswoman Beryl Crosby told *The Sunday Mail*. "The Government should change their policy and instead spend the money on more beds in intensive care units.

"Right now we're more interested in health and care. If we want to look at sculptures we'll go to the art museum."

Doctors also called for the policy to be scrapped.

Australian Medical Association Queensland president Dr Steve Hambleton said the money could have paid for up to 15 fully-staffed hospital beds, 10 extra doctors or a staffed intensive-care bed in a major hospital, which would decrease surgery cancellations and reduce emergency waiting times.

"We don't need sculptures or expensive art in hospitals – it won't make people feel nice in emergency departments or waiting areas," he said. "We need to focus on patient care."

Queensland Arts Minister Rod Welford said that while the Art Built-In policy dictated up to 2 per cent of spending on public capital works projects should go to art, in Queensland Health's case it had only been 0.14 per cent since 1999.

"While the capital spending in health since 1999 has been $1.8 billion, art spending has been only $2.6 million – and that spending has not detracted from the capital spending," Mr Welford said.

"That investment has created 164 jobs for Queensland artists, art workers and project managers to integrate artworks in the public areas of health buildings across the state."

Mr Welford said the art went in public spaces of hospitals, not in operating theatres or management offices, and applied to building projects which cost more than $250,000.

"It's not just art, some of it serves other purposes such as public information, furnishings and other building design elements."

"Often the art comes from the community or from students.

"Public art in health facilities is not unique to Queensland. Arts in health is a well-defined area of practice internationally and here in Australia.

"Art is known to have a therapeutic and calming effect for some patients, particularly for children and young people.

"Well-designed public areas at hospitals such as foyers where patients and their families might wait, and outdoor garden areas which may include some art features, can have a beneficial effect on patients."

Details of government spending on art for hospitals comes in the wake of criticism about a controversial million-dollar health sponsorship deal for the Brisbane Broncos.

Premier Peter Beattie slashed the funding from a Queensland Health preventive campaign after former health inquiry head Tony Morris raised questions about the expenditure.

Mr Morris embarrassed the Government by asking why people were waiting for surgery when a huge sum of money was funding the Broncos.

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CALM BEFORE THE STORM: Ocean screens in the foyer of Princess Alexandra Hospital *(top left)*; sculpture seating in Logan Health Centre foyer; protester Beryl Crosby

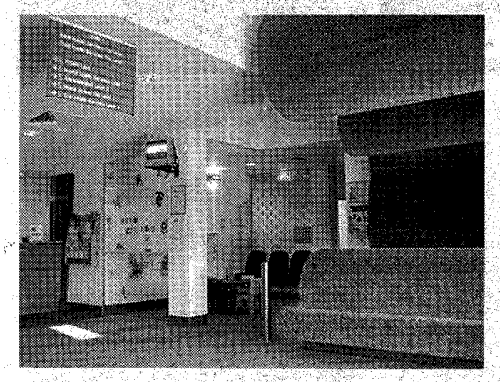
BIG SPENDER

Recent Art Built-In projects in health facilities:

- **Qld Health Skills Development Centre: Three large screens of digital art.**
- Royal Brisbane Hospital: Indigenous artwork in the Joyce Tweddell building.
- **Princess Alexandra Hospital: Glass screens with images of ocean in foyer designed as a calming device for patients.**
- West Moreton Health Service: Indigenous art exhibition in the Bell St Community Health Plaza.

The Sunday Mail

Art low priority



HOSPITALS need not be gloomy places where patients are confronted with nothing but bare walls and mysterious medical apparatus.

In fact, congenial surroundings are calming, can help the healing process and are conducive to good workplace practices.

However, it should be possible to provide pleasant surroundings at a modest cost without turning our hospitals into galleries for artworks of sometimes dubious taste and value.

In the present climate, where vast numbers of Queenslanders feel badly let down by the health system, works of art must take a low priority.

Almost $3 million spent on art over the past five years might seem small change in a department with an annual budget of $5.4 billion, but tell that to someone who might be waiting for a hospital bed or has been denied some procedure because of budgetary restrictions.

It is all a matter of public priorities and private perceptions.

That money could bankroll 15 hospital beds or 10 more doctors, which our health system desperately needs more than soothing pictures and innovative artworks.

Arts Minister Rod Welford points out that the spending project has created jobs for 164 Queensland artists, art workers and project managers.

However, most reasonable Queenslanders would not see the employment and nurturing of artists as the Health Department's role.

If and when we can find the money to fix the health problems now being exposed on a daily basis, perhaps then we could look at an arts program.

Until then, our health system needs every dollar it can get.