

## Chapter 14

# Health Policy as Contested Terrain in the Australian Federation

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### I Introduction

In April 2010, the Council of Australian Governments ('COAG') met over two intense days to negotiate a National Health and Hospitals Network Agreement<sup>1</sup> that committed the signatory jurisdictions to 'the most significant reform to Australia's health and hospitals system since the introduction of Medicare'.<sup>2</sup> The Agreement was said to herald a 'fundamental shift ... for our federation'.<sup>3</sup> However, just 10 months later, COAG changed its mind. The *Heads of Agreement: National Health Reform*,<sup>4</sup> signed in February 2011, substantially altered key elements of the earlier national health reform plan.

This chapter examines these two COAG decisions in the wider context of the actions, reactions and interactions of the nine Australian governments, over a four year period, as they worked to achieve agreement on the objectives, scope and content of a program of national health reform. The descriptive analysis of the positions adopted by Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and how these shifted over time, seeks to illuminate the way health care policy is played out in our federal system of government. At a broader level, the analysis

\* The views expressed in this chapter are the author's alone. They are not presented in the author's capacity as a Health Service staff member and do not represent an official position.

1 Council of Australian Governments, *National Health and Hospitals Network Agreement* (Commonwealth of Australia, April 2010). <[http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/related\\_agreements/NHHN\\_Agreement.pdf](http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/related_agreements/NHHN_Agreement.pdf)>.

2 COAG, Communiqué (19-20 April 2010) <[http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2010-04-19/docs/communique\\_20\\_April\\_2010.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2010-04-19/docs/communique_20_April_2010.pdf)>.

3 Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Government, *A National Health And Hospitals Network For Australia's Future: Delivering the Reforms* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) 3.

4 COAG, *Attachment A: Heads of Agreement: National Health Reform* (2011) <[http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2011-02-13/docs/communique\\_attachmentA-heads\\_of\\_agreement-national\\_health\\_reform\\_signatures.pdf](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2011-02-13/docs/communique_attachmentA-heads_of_agreement-national_health_reform_signatures.pdf)>.

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