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Doctors lobby group would welcome Arthur Sinodinos as health minister

Australian Medical Association says it's 'not playing favourites' amid speculation Sinodinos will replace Sussan Ley



Arthur Sinodinos has been filling in for the former health minister Sussan Ley, who resigned on Friday, since she stood aside on Monday. Photograph: Paul Miller/AAP

Paul Karp

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The president of the Australian Medical Association, Michael Gannon, has welcomed the possible appointment of Arthur Sinodinos as health minister, though he insists he is “not playing favourites”.

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is “not playing favourites”.

“We’ve heard the rumours Sinodinos might be appointed permanently ... He fits the bill: he’s a very capable man and a senior minister,” Gannon said on Sunday.

Sinodinos has been acting health minister since Monday when Sussan Ley stood aside pending an investigation into her travel expenses. She resigned on Friday, necessitating a minor cabinet reshuffle or new appointment.

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However, Labor questioned whether it would be appropriate for Sinodinos to serve as health minister because the New South Wales Liberal party took donations from cigarette companies when he was honorary treasurer between 2009 and 2011.

That included \$50,000 of donations from British American Tobacco in 2009-10, and \$7,600 from Phillip Morris.

The prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, spent Sunday consulting on a replacement, which is expected to be announced by mid week.

On Sunday, Fairfax Media suggested Sinodinos may keep the role permanently because he reportedly wanted to return to the “frontline” of politics.

Other mooted replacements include the innovation and industry minister, Greg Hunt, the communications minister, Mitch Fifield, the environment and energy minister, Josh Frydenberg, and the regional health minister, Fiona Nash, who is the Nationals deputy leader.

In response to reports he wanted a ministry, a spokesman for Sinodinos told Guardian Australia: “The allocation of portfolios is a matter for the prime minister.”

Labor’s health spokeswoman, Catherine King, told Guardian Australia that half a decade after Labor stopped taking tobacco donations, Sinodinos and the NSW Liberals “had no problem being bankrolled by big tobacco”.

“If Arthur Sinodinos becomes health minister he takes on responsibility for tackling the largest preventable cause of disease and death in Australia.”

Sinodinos’s spokesman said he had no comment about whether the party’s receipt of tobacco donations meant it was inappropriate for him to be health minister.

On Sunday Gannon told Guardian Australia the AMA wanted “a senior minister who is invested in the portfolio” but was “ready willing and able to work with whoever is selected”.

Gannon said the fact Sinodinos sat in the Senate would either break the convention that a minister and their shadow sit in the same house, or Labor could take the health portfolio from King, who sits in the lower house.

Gannon said the fact Gannon sat in the Senate would break the convention that a minister and their shadow sit in the same house, or Labor could take the health portfolio from King, who sits in the lower house.

He said that would be a “great loss” as King was “extremely capable and very knowledgeable”.

Gannon expressed disappointment at Ley losing the health ministry, because of the significant time she had invested in understanding the portfolio.

“Ley has set in place a large number of reviews, which will gradually report back - it will require a great deal of finesse to prosecute the Coalition’s health agenda.

“There are still a number of policies in place that they took to the last election that many Australians rejected.”

Gannon said the Medicare rebate freeze, affecting both GPs and specialists, “remains

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the major sticking point and cause of the trust deficit between the government and medical profession”. He added it could increase out-of-pocket payments by patients and barriers to accessing health care.

At a press conference in Ballarat, King said she didn’t think it would matter who the new minister was because the government’s “entire agenda has been about cutting health”.

“Continuing on the table is the freezing of the Medicare benefits schedule which is seeing doctors starting to charge patients significant amounts of money just to go and see GPs.

“They’ve got the co-payment increases to pharmaceutical benefits, making people pay more for medicines. Still on the table are cuts to pathology and diagnostic imaging.”

In October 2015 Sinodinos returned as cabinet secretary after Malcolm Turnbull took the leadership.

Sinodinos had stood aside as assistant treasurer in 2014 pending investigation by the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption of Australian Water Holdings, of which he was the deputy director.

Sinodinos was cleared in relation to AWH but faced enormous political pressure over illegal donations from property developers through the Free Enterprise Foundation to the New South Wales Liberal party during his time as treasurer of the party, of which he said he was unaware.

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