
Media Release

16 January 2017

Union's strike action hits patients hard

Several thousand patients nationwide will be directly impacted by the NZ Resident Doctors' Association's decision to proceed with a 73-hour strike at 18 of the 20 DHBs this week.

Having to reschedule outpatient clinics and surgical operations across the country has taken its toll on patients waiting for their appointments. As a result of the two-day RMO strike in October, 1,000 patients nationwide had their treatments affected. This week's strike is for three days and will likely quadruple that impact as hospital staff that would normally offer cover through strike action are still on Christmas leave.

Julie Patterson, lead CEO for the DHBs' Employment Relations Programme and Whanganui DHB CEO said that, in the Northern region alone, more than 2,200 patients will be affected across Northland, Waitemata, Auckland and Counties Manukau DHBs. Waikato DHB is postponing around 500 patient bookings due to the strike. Bay of Plenty DHB has postponed 350 planned surgeries and appointments.

"This situation is reflected right around the country causing unnecessary discomfort and inconvenience to many thousands of patients in need of treatment," she said.

With careful roster planning Wairarapa DHB is trying to minimise effects on patients this week, aiming for less patient disruption than in October's strike when more than 120 patients were rescheduled.

Wairarapa DHB's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Tom Gibson, said that he was frustrated by the hours spent on preparing for the strike. "A three day strike effectively curtails one whole week of work, which inevitably leads to delay in patient treatment, and the increased work for management staff has been enormously disruptive.

"I am grateful for the work many staff have put in to minimise the effects of the strike, and apologise for any delays patients' experience," he said.

“It is hard to comprehend why the strike is continuing when DHBs have already agreed and addressed the key issues of the debate. If the unions latest demands were met, as they currently stand, Wairarapa DHB would have to seriously consider its health service delivery in a 24/7 environment.” Dr Gibson said.

Julie Patterson agrees. “The union is now wanting to play around at the margins, and all this will do is cause disruption for people in real need. Dr Powell has admitted a key outstanding issue is a matter of work-life balance preferences, not RMO health and safety.”

“The union is putting the lifestyle interests of their members ahead of the healthcare needs of the public. The public should hold the union’s leader, Dr Deborah Powell, to account,” she said.

The strike begins at 7am Tuesday 17th January and continues for 73 hours at all but two of the country’s DHBs. RMOs at Taranaki and West Coast hospitals chose not to support the strike.

The emergency department (ED) at Wairarapa Hospital will remain open throughout the strike, but the public is urged to remember that the ED is for emergencies only. People with non-urgent injuries or illnesses will experience longer waiting times and should visit their GP in the first instance.

Anyone unsure about whether they need ED care should contact their GP or call Healthline (0800 611 116) for free advice from a registered nurse.

Comment from the CE:

Chief Executive, Adri Isbister says her main priority and focus is the Wairarapa community, and ensuring the quality of health services.

“Being a small DHB we can become vulnerable – even being just a few staff down can put pressure on services and rostering is a complex issue,” she says. “Not all of what the union is demanding appears to be feasible, however we have rightly met all health and safety concerns.

“I am hugely grateful for the hard working senior medical staff, the nurses, the allied health teams, ambulance staff and general practices for once again stepping up to support service delivery and ensure our community and patients are well looked after through this period.”

ENDS

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