

Media release

Intoxicated patients are a headache – how alcohol impacts the emergency department

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“The impact of alcohol on our health service is significant, and increasingly frustrating,” says Wairarapa District Health Board communications manager, Anna Cardno. “Especially so when coupled with drug use.”

“People present to the emergency department intoxicated, aggressive and disruptive, making staff and patients uncomfortable and placing them at risk. Our waiting room is a shared space and coping with intoxicated patients is extremely difficult for our team to manage.”

Charge Nurse Manager, Kathryn Wadsworth says drunk behaviour is not confined to weekends.

“The drinking culture seems to have changed over time, and we can expect intoxicated presentations any time of the week, particularly from Thursday through to Sunday.”

“Intoxicated people carry a high safety risk, not only for the staff and fellow patients, but also for themselves. They can be extremely disruptive, and it makes for a very unpleasant environment for all concerned, particularly for our very young, very old and very sick patients who would not normally be exposed to that sort of language and behaviour.

“Even if they have only minor injuries that wouldn’t require more than basic first aid, we need to keep intoxicated patients in ED until they have sobered up, to ensure they are safely discharged. It is frustrating to have to use our ED space for someone requiring observation while they sleep it off.”

If people have been drinking heavily the severity of injuries they might sustain does increase, and it can make treatment difficult.

“Head injuries are hard to manage when it comes to an intoxicated patient,” Kathryn explains.

“Assessing a head injury is next to impossible if the patient is very drunk. The risk of vomiting and aspiration is also high.”

“Dealing with drunk and disorderly patients takes a lot of time and focused management.”

The hospital increased its security last year, partly due to issues relating to alcohol.

Gabe Wickens, Lead Orderley at the hospital, says alcohol and drugs cause a real headache for his team.

“People under the influence of drugs or alcohol, particularly those with both on board, are a problem for all District Health Boards,” he said. “They often display petty, silly behaviour that is hard to manage and it can be difficult to calm them down.”

“It’s really frustrating, especially if they don’t require any significant medical treatment,” Gabe said. “Recently we had a drunk person in that didn’t need to stay with us, but the taxi he called quite rightly refused to take him – so he became our problem.”

The DHB is grateful for the service from the local Police team.

“The Police are quick to respond to any calls from the hospital,” Anna Cardno said. “The relationship we have with them is excellent and we highly value their guidance and support.”

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For more information:

Anna Cardno | Communications Manager Wairarapa DHB

Mobile: 027 205 24 22

anna.cardno@wairarapa.dhb.org.nz