

Code Red – what it means for Wairarapa

Wairarapa Hospital explains surgery delays

23 October 2019

Yesterday, Wairarapa hospital was in code red for the second time this year. With all its beds full, capacity was stretched beyond what was manageable and some elective surgeries (planned surgery by appointment) were cancelled in order to treat urgent need.

For some patients, it was not the first time their appointment was put off. Wairarapa DHB Chief Medical Officer, Shawn Sturland, explains.

Wairarapa Hospital has 74 inpatient beds, and planning bed use is a complex business. We build on a patient safety matrix that works within our rostered staff resource to allow for a variable guesstimate of urgent presentations versus planned surgery and resident medical patient cases. Sometimes, as we have experienced this month, we see an unexpected increase in urgent trauma and illness presentations that tip that balance.

Today we are coping, but yesterday we had more patients than we had beds and staff for. We call this a Code Red. To manage, we are forced to look at finding more beds, bringing in more staff, and, as a last resort, rescheduling elective surgeries.

Our AAU (Acute Assessment Unit) is a short stay unit for non-critical medical patients. In a Code Red, we can repurpose the beds for admitted patients and bring in extra staff. This is not sustainable long term. During times of pressure, we will work hard to assess inpatients, discharging as appropriate and freeing up beds. Delaying surgical appointments is the last approach taken – but that is sometimes unavoidable.

When we have a lot of urgent need, it puts pressure on staff and patients alike. Patient safety is first and foremost, and all our decisions are made with the patient at the centre. The considerable inconvenience for someone in having their surgery delayed is well understood – so our patients can be assured that if it happens, we have had unavoidable reasons for doing so.

We are grateful for the high-functioning staff we have here and their commitment to our patients. It is extraordinary the way the team works together to problem solve and get the job done.

Wairarapa Hospital being under pressure is not just down to an influx of seasonal illness and acute injury – there is a bigger picture. The broader context of continuing industrial action, staffing vacancies and recruitment challenges, and high numbers of low acuity patients all adds complexity; it's not a situation that we will see changing any time soon.