

Reasons for a hospital pass

In the wake of yet another young doctors' strike, I suspect a lot of Taranaki people are getting an unwelcome letter saying their pre-specialist appointment at Taranaki Base Hospital has been postponed.

I hope it's more informative than one I received in January. It said nothing more than the appointment made in October to see a Taranaki District Health Board employee wouldn't be happening in the usual four month waiting time, but if anything worried me in the meantime I was to get hold of my GP.

Apart from the non-communicative features of the whole bland epistle, that last bit baffled me.

For the past couple of years, the GP had been monitoring a mysterious affliction that gives me brief zone-outs, and when I had a particularly bad turn - after which I couldn't even remember my computer password - he decided I should be assessed at Base Hospital.

What purpose would be served by going back to him? He didn't know what was wrong. Perhaps the idea was that if things got worse he could get in touch with the hospital again.

But the letter didn't say that. In fact, as a piece of communication it ranked as the worst I've seen.

Without taking the recommended deep breath, I sat down and wrote a list of 19 things I wanted to know, please, and sent it back to the anonymous communicator, with a stern warning that given I have access to a public forum - this column - in no way were they to recoil in panic at the prospect of bad publicity and bump me up the queue.

My questions covered reasons for the delays, who was providing specialist services and had they been cut back, how many patients were affected, and what was the board doing to fix it.

The first reply was classic public relations, but after I met managers I was sent a comprehensive explanation from chief operations officer Gillian Campbell.

She says rising demand for the board's services has been challenging for a number of years, with an increase in patients referred to general medicine and surgical services, and in requests for first specialist assessment appointments.

Wait times have been affected recently by staff sickness and vacancies, as well as industrial action, which meant the capacity to see patients within the four month time-frame set by the Ministry of Health is "currently more challenging".

The board gets about 1200 referrals for specialist appointments each week. The number waiting changes as referrals are reviewed by the clinical team and appointments with specialists made (or not).

"Currently, we are working with between 200-400 patients who are not scheduled in the four month time-frame...with continued planning and scheduling it is difficult to give an exact number until time-frames are exceeded. All referrals are prioritised... urgent referrals will always get priority."

Of those services delivered in Taranaki, the majority are provided by the board's employed staff, although some are contracted out to larger tertiary boards like Waikato or Auckland, and some covered by board employees who travel to New Plymouth.

Specialists employed or directly contracted by Taranaki DHB include anaesthetics/ICU consultants; dentists and dental surgeons; emergency medicine; general medicine and sub-specialties such as rheumatology, endocrinology, gastroenterology and cardiology physicians; general surgeons; geriatricians (including the stroke team); mental health consultants (psychiatrists); obstetrics and gynaecology surgeons; ophthalmology; ear-nose-throat surgeons; orthopaedic surgeons; pain consultants; pathologists; paediatricians; public health physicians; radiologists; a vascular surgeon; and a urologist (one employed, but also a visiting service).

The sub-specialists come to Taranaki DHB on a regular and rostered basis, she says. Has their time been cut back? "No - to try to keep up with demand we have increased our capacity to see patients in some services, including general medicine."

They have employed additional senior and junior medical staff over recent years and scheduled additional outpatient and theatre sessions both during the week and on weekends to try to keep up with waiting lists. In 2018, Taranaki Base and Hawera hospitals admitted and cared for 26,216 people.

How unusual is this situation? "This is business as usual for Taranaki DHB...and most DHBs across New Zealand," says Campbell. Makes you wonder, when you hear young doctors are being asked do 72-hour weeks. As one of their strike signs said: "Tired doctors make mistakes."

In case you're wondering, I was finally seen and the doctor reckoned I probably just need to slow down a bit. There's an MRI scan scheduled just in case.