

Impatience that rules our wards

I was in hospital and I was torn; not physically but professionally, by something alarming, and newsworthy, that happened in the middle of my consultation with a doctor.

Somebody threw a table through a window. It happened on the floor above the doctor's office in one of the many buildings at Taranaki Base Hospital in New Plymouth.

We were just going through some personal stuff I won't bore you with - me, the doctor and Lin - when there was a helluva crash and the sight of broken glass falling past his ground-floor office window.

The doctor and I rushed outside and looked up to see half a table big enough to seat four sticking through a shattered window. There was no sign of anyone, no sound.

We returned to our exchange, my mind racing with the photographic news potential of what I'd just seen, the experience of a lifetime begging me to do something that another part of me, the more urgent as it turned out, was saying loudly would be inappropriate.

Decorum won (I must be getting old). Until today, when I read of the appalling behaviour hospital staff face from patients these days. Reading the statistics took me back to that strange day, when the medic shrugged and we carried on as if it was all routine.

It may well be. Data obtained by Stuff recently revealed there were more than 10,000 incidents of physical, verbal, psychological and sexual assault and abuse across New Zealand's district health boards over the past four years.

Taranaki District Health Board staff suffered bruising, swollen hands, crush injuries, skin tears, persistent ringing in ears and hearing loss, jaw contusion, stomach pains after being kicked, open wounds, and more.

In one incident in 2018, a staff member was left with abdominal bruises, frontal haematoma and concussion. On the same day, another suffered a head injury, cut lip, bleeding nose, split upper and lower gums and back pains after a patient assault.

Medical staff are reported to be traumatised, and patients are the biggest contributing factor; but there are also social, environmental and communication issues.

You and I, of course, profess to be reasonable, friendly (and grateful) people when it comes to being attended. Nothing makes us irascible to the point of physical violence because we can't get our way. Surely.

So, who are these patients without patience, the dangerously out-of-control souls who throw tantrums beyond all reasonable expectation?

The Taranaki Base Hospital floor where the table thrower vented his or her rage is the mental health centre, which probably accounts for the fact nothing appeared in the news via the courts. Such outbursts are no doubt considered routine and dealt with accordingly.

However, hospital violence statistics now suggest behaviour hitherto confined mainly to the mentally ill has become so widespread that every other ward in Taranaki's main hospital must be similarly alert to physical risk.

Which means there is now another reason to prefer private hospital care other than speed of attention, if you have medical insurance or can afford it.

Most of us can't. In an emergency, most of us are up there in the A and E waiting room along with everyone else, trying to ignore the anti-social behaviour of a minority that seems to be growing, praying for the hours to pass so we can get through those automatic doors to the sanctuary of care.

Except, the sanctuary is losing its appeal.

I noticed it the last time I was up there and the person I visited was in a shared room with five others. There were a couple whose beds were shielded by curtains, and after a short time you got the message they weren't being protected from our curiosity but to screen them and their unsavoury visitors from our view.

It was a women's ward and most of the patients were middle aged or elderly, and at times they looked intimidated by what was going on behind those curtains, nervous about the comings and goings.

They were worried about the plight of someone whose injuries looked suspiciously non-accidental. A visit by the police did nothing to assuage fears.

It now seems a fact of life that the wonderful people who staff our hospitals have much more to worry about than dispensing medical care.

The haven they have traditionally created for the rest of us is under threat from people whose own lives have lost value, including the one to be well.