



Theatres idle: sick children wait

Kamala Hayman

Two of Christchurch's five new operating theatres are sitting empty despite over 200 children lingering on surgery waiting lists.

Five new operating theatres were created as part of the \$79 million construction of Christchurch Women's Hospital. This opened in March, but only three of its day theatres were commissioned for use.

Paediatric surgeon and chief of child health services in Canterbury Spencer Beasley said lack of access to theatre time was "a critical problem" for Canterbury.

About 70 per cent of more than 200 children on his elective waiting list could be treated in day surgery for conditions such as hernias and undescended testes.

"But we have empty day theatres, just sitting there closed. It is very frustrating."

Beasley had seen a significant deterioration in waiting times in the past six years.

"We used to not have waiting lists — we would just give (children) a date and do them promptly."

Now many waited a year or more for surgery.

Beasley said children were not the only group struggling to get into

elective surgery.

"All the specialities are suffering," he said. "In our hospital, like a lot of other hospitals, there is inadequate provision for elective surgery.

We are just not given enough lists to get through the work required."

Yesterday morning, Beasley was called to do an urgent operation on a newborn baby, but no anaesthetist could be found, delaying the operation to the afternoon.

This forced the cancellation of an elective operation on a nine-year-old Kaiapoi boy who had been waiting since July last year.

After a 14-month wait, Sean Sewhoy was given just a few hours notice that his operation was cancelled.

His father, John Sewhoy, did not begrudge the baby's right to surgery.

"But Sean should have still have been able to go and have his operation."

Sean, who has special needs, was rebooked for surgery next



Sean Sewhoy



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Wednesday, ruining plans for a family holiday in Dunedin.

"He's disappointed. He won't be doing anything now, and that's the holidays gone," said his father.

"I feel a wee bit sorry for him. I just want him to get a good quality of life."

Beasley believed a shortage of theatre nurses was a significant constraint. "We have excellent theatre nurses, but just not enough of them."

New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) chief executive Geoff Annals said theatre nurses were in short supply nationwide and were part of an international shortage of registered nurses.

In March, an orthopaedic surgeon at Auckland's Starship Hospital complained that 40% of his elective operations were being cancelled because of a shortage of theatre nurses.

Canterbury NZNO organiser Joy Coughlan said Christchurch Hospital was "very short-staffed" and suffering a high turnover of nurses.

"A lot of people have left and not everybody has been replaced. We are not sure if it is a lack of willingness or lack of ability on behalf of the DHB (district health board)," she said.

Union members at Christchurch

Hospital did not believe nursing shortages were causing operations to be cancelled, she said.

Two weeks ago, Society of Paediatric Surgeons president Brendon Bowkett warned that Christchurch and Wellington were falling 6% behind targets for surgery on children, with a nursing shortage affecting both centres.

"Children are waiting excessive times for elective surgery, and families experience repeated cancellations," he said.

He said it was not unusual for children to wait more than a year for elective surgery, and 18 months was not exceptional.

The Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) said the two unused day-surgery theatres would be commissioned "as required". It is understood this may not be for several years.

CDHB women's and children's general manager Pauline Burt said there was "always a turnover of operating theatre nurses", and the board was actively recruiting, but it was "very unusual" for theatre lists to be affected by nursing shortages.

In the past two months, paediatric surgery numbers had fallen behind target, but Burt expected numbers to be made up by the end of the financial year.