



NSW NURSES AND MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION

MEDIA RELEASE

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John Hunter operating theatres at 'breaking point'

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) today accused the Hunter New England Local Health District (LHD) of running surgical theatres at John Hunter Hospital (JHH) to the point of breakdown through fudging its staffing levels and driving nursing staff beyond the point of exhaustion.

NSWNMA General Secretary, Brett Holmes, said today an expert report commissioned by the Association had found hospital management was "cooking the books" by claiming the correct number of qualified nurses to run the operating theatres while not allowing for their entitlements to annual leave, sick leave and long service leave in their budgets.

"The long and short is, nurses are being told they can't take leave - they claim all leave for 2014 and 2015 is 'booked out'. No one else need apply. Some staff haven't had a holiday or decent break in years.

"They are being worked past the point of exhaustion. Their health and welfare is in grave danger and safe patient care cannot be guaranteed with staff half dead from fatigue," Mr Holmes said.

The report by Kerry Rodgers (RN), an acknowledged expert on the Australian College of Operating Room Nurses (ACORN) standards, found staff shortfalls in every category of nursing throughout the 24 hour, 365 day operating theatre complex. The complex includes theatres at JHH and Royal Newcastle Centre.

"In a nutshell, Ms Rodgers found that to staff the facility according to ACORN standards - which are officially accepted as the safe, adequate levels and are legally required - requires 214 full-time equivalent (FTE) nurses.

"They are up there at the moment running it with 177 - 37 less than the legal minimum. And they are running the nurses they do have into the ground. They are at breaking point and ready to take direct action to protect themselves and their patients.

"We've had cases of nurses quitting their jobs from sheer exhaustion just to get a break. One



resigned in the past fortnight. It's an insane way to run something as critical as an operating theatre suite and disgraceful way to fiddle hospital budgets," Mr Holmes said.

The John Hunter Hospital branch of the NSWNMA met last Thursday to discuss the Report and demand a response to it from the LHD and JHH management. Mr Holmes said many were extremely angry at the way they are being treated. Management agreed to meet on Monday with its response to the Report. "But our meeting passed a resolution that, failing a satisfactory answer and immediate action to fix this crisis, we will be taking industrial action on Tuesday. In response, the LHD notified a dispute in the Industrial Relations Commission. The Commission has set a hearing for 9am Monday.

"The mood in that unit could be described as at boiling point. It's not just the exhaustion. People have families and kids. Their reward for being highly trained, skilled and committed theatre nurses at John Hunter is they never get to have a holiday with their children.

"And they never get an honest answer from management about the true state of the unit's budget. It's just appalling," Mr Holmes said.

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