



NSW NURSES AND MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## Almost 7,000 nursing care hours missing at John Hunter Hospital

Upset by gross understaffing, hundreds of nurses and midwives have today expressed their anger over patients being short-changed thousands of nursing care hours at John Hunter Hospital during a seven month period.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) has uncovered evidence of local patients missing out on 6,695 hours of nursing care from late December to July this year, as a result of Hunter New England Local Health District deliberately breaching the *Public Health System Nurses and Midwives (state) Award*.

At a meeting of NSWNMA branch members today, nurses and midwives discussed the growing number of issues plaguing John Hunter Hospital, the major tertiary referral hospital for all of northern NSW.

General Secretary of the NSWNMA, Brett Holmes, said the situation at John Hunter Hospital was becoming untenable, nursing and midwifery staff were at breaking point, and the evidence of nursing hours being withheld from patients was unacceptable.

"The level of understaffing at John Hunter cannot continue. Our members are fed up with inadequate levels of patient care, the opening of unfunded and understaffed beds, forced excessive overtime, sick leave not being replaced, an excessive use of underqualified staff, missed meal breaks and unpaid overtime – just to name a few," said Mr Holmes.

"It's unbelievable that the Local Health District is unaware of these issues, given they have been occurring for at least the last seven months and probably longer.

"Local Health Districts collects a large amount of data from their hospitals and these staffing issues would have been evident."

Following months of frustration, John Hunter Hospital Branch members wrote to management in June outlining the range of issues that were generating serious patient safety concerns across the facility.

"After raising the concerns through a number of Reasonable Workloads Committees with little improvement, we exercised our industrial rights to obtain hospital data and establish the scope of understaffing occurring across multiple wards and units," Mr Holmes said.

"The results are shameful. Under the Public Health System Award, public hospitals must provide a minimum number of nursing hours per patient each day, in most wards at John Hunter the minimum is 6.0 nursing hours, yet Hunter New England LHD failed to deliver it repeatedly.

"Patients have effectively been short-changed on the safe nursing care they should have received to assist their recovery.

"It's interesting to note that management suddenly started complying with the Award after we used our industrial rights. Unfortunately however, the hospital's technique of enforcing overtime on already exhausted nurses and midwives further exacerbated the frustration of our members.



"I'm not surprised that senior nursing and midwifery staff have been leaving due to the unsafe workloads and conditions.

"Our members are extremely upset and I don't blame them. It's not acceptable to continue to force an unreasonable amount of excessive overtime on staff."

The NSWNMA today called on Hunter New England LHD to fill all nursing vacancies, to ensure they meet the Award requirements of 6.0 nursing hours per patient per day, or the equivalent of one nurse to four patients on the relevant wards.

In addition, the NSWNMA said sufficient extra staff must be hired to fill short-term, unexpected vacancies, for example sick leave, to eliminate the need for nurses and midwives to stay back on forced overtime.

The NSWNMA also insisted Hunter New England LHD ensures registered nurses and registered midwives are replaced by registered nurses and midwives respectively when those vacancies occur.

"It's simply not acceptable in a tertiary referral teaching hospital like John Hunter for registered nurses to be routinely replaced by less experienced assistants in nursing," added Mr Holmes.

"We do not accept the notion that there's not enough nurses or midwives around to fill these vacancies. This excuse is being purported to our members across the state.

"Local Health Districts need to be more proactive and innovative in their recruitment strategies to address this issue.

"All nurses and midwives have a professional obligation to ensure safe patient care and currently at John Hunter they have been put at risk. The people of Newcastle and northern NSW deserve much better."

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