

An Open Letter to Michael Di Rienzo, Chief Executive, Hunter New England Local Health District from Clinicians in John Hunter Hospital Emergency Department, and its supporting services

Dear Mr Di Rienzo

We the undersigned are the clinical staff that service and operate the John Hunter Hospital (JHH) Emergency Department. We are educated, professional and experienced nurses, doctors and paramedics and supporting services dedicated to the care of others.

The JHH Emergency Department is the only Level 6 Tertiary Referral Emergency Department between Newcastle and the Queensland border, and the second busiest in the state with over 22,000 ED presentations over the Jan- March quarter (Bureau of Health Information [BHI] 2021 quarterly report). The JHH Emergency Department services the ever-growing population of the Greater Hunter area and is the principal referral centre for all paediatric emergencies and trauma for NSW (outside of Sydney).

As Chief Executive of Hunter New England Local Health District (HNELHD), we raise the following urgent concerns to you and request your immediate attention to rectify these issues.

It is our professional view that the JHH Emergency Department is in a state of crisis. The current staffing profile of the JHH Emergency Department can no longer cope with the strain and complexity of increasing presentations and your clinical workforce is at breaking point.

There are insufficient clinical staff to support the JHH Emergency Department, with nursing staff forced to work excessive amounts of overtime hours. Shifts of up to 20 hours are occurring regularly. In recent times, numerous patient episodes have occurred in the waiting room as patients have been unable to be triaged and commence treatment in the recommended timeframes. These episodes have included patients going into cardiac arrest, multiple patients collapsing, and septic patients not receiving antibiotics within the "golden hour".

Clinical staff are exhausted, frustrated, and angry. We are angry that NSW Health and HNELHD are failing in your duty of care to protect the health and safety of both employees and patients attending the JHH Emergency Department, by allowing the current situation to continue unabated.

Nurses in the JHH Emergency Department have continually raised concerns regarding staffing levels and excessive overtime directly with facility, service, and unit management, and through the appropriate Reasonable Workload Committee channels. Yet our concerns to date, have either been ignored or, where supported by facility and service management for rectification, they have then been overruled by Executive Management.

Nursing staff have a professional obligation to act to ensure they provide safe and professional care. This obligation to act is enshrined in the **Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) Decision-making framework for nursing and midwifery (2020)**. Under the current model of care in the JHH Emergency Department, nursing staff are therefore extremely concerned about our ability to provide safe nursing care.

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We believe the following minimum improvements to staffing arrangements are urgently required in the JHH Emergency Department, to ensure the provision of safe patient care:

1. A dedicated nursing unit manager on all shifts;
2. A minimum of two triage nurses and Clinical Initiatives Nurses on all shifts to ensure the timely triaging and care of patients in the JHH ED waiting room;
3. 1:1 nursing care to patients in resuscitation beds at all times;
4. A dedicated nurse navigator on all shifts;
5. Two dedicated nurses to the ED ambulance bays at all times;
6. A minimum of one nurse to a maximum of 3 patients (category 3 – 5) at all times;
7. A minimum of 1.4 FTE CNE to every 30 Nursing Staff members employed; and
8. The continuation of the emergency paediatric mental health nurses; once the trial period has concluded on 26 June 2021.

We call upon you, Mr Di Rienzo, to urgently meet personally with all JHH Emergency Department clinical staff to discuss our concerns within three (3) business days of sending this letter.

Given the decisions of the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, with regard to events at Bacchus Marsh, we believe the safety of our patients is at heightened risk, and in the absence of action by HNELHD to urgently rectify the situation, our professional obligations will require us to act accordingly. This includes bringing the matter to the notice of relevant Ministerial Departments, the broader community, and ultimately considerations as to whether we will continue working in an unsafe workplace.

Sincerely,

The undersigned.