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Staffing solution denied for under pressure Emergency Department

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation Tasmanian Branch (ANMF), alongside our members working in the Launceston General Hospital (LGH) Emergency Department, are incredibly concerned that an agreed business case to increase staffing levels at the LGH Emergency Department has been denied by the Department of Health. The business case, which was negotiated between local Tasmanian Health Service (THS) management and the ANMF, sought to provide much needed relief to under pressure nurses.

Following years of ANMF campaigning and advocacy for patient safety, a workload grievance was raised in October last year. Despite this, the LGH Emergency Department continues to be the worst performing Emergency Department in the country.

Despite local THS management agreeing to prepare a business case with the aim of alleviating safety issues for staff and risks to patient care by requesting similar staffing levels to those in the Royal Hobart Hospital (RHH) Emergency Department, the business case has been denied by the Department of Health with no alternative strategies suggested.

As a result, the ANMF has submitted a Right to Information (RTI) application to obtain a copy of the business case and the approval chain and rationale for the non-approval of it. This action follows several requests from the ANMF to THS management, all of which have been declined.

ANMF Tasmanian Branch Secretary, Emily Shepherd today stated, "it is alarming that a mutually agreed solution between local THS management and the ANMF to address profound safety issues for staff and patients alike, has not been supported by the Department of Health. Even more alarmingly, no other strategies have been suggested to ameliorate concerns."

There is no doubt that the LGH Emergency Department is under significant strain with 90% of admitted patients in 2019-2020 spending on average 11 hours and 57 minutes in the Emergency Department. Ramping of ambulances and an overcrowded waiting room are now regular occurrences.

"The toll that the continued strain working in an over stretched and under resourced Emergency Department has on nursing staff and their colleagues is immeasurable. Many experienced staff have left, with no solutions or support on the horizon. How the Department of Health and the Tasmanian Government can stand by, for years, while the LGH Emergency Department and its staff struggle every day is unconscionable," said Ms Shepherd.

In 2020, the LGH Emergency Department was benchmarked according to the existing industrial workload model which resulted in an increase in nursing staff which would meet the needs of an Emergency Department that was functioning in an ideal world with no access block. The current LGH Emergency Department is afflicted by access block every day and the current workload model does not take these challenges into account.

“The THS agree that the current workload model is not meeting the needs of Emergency Department’s across the State and a working group has been convened to review the model and make recommendations for improvement. However, despite agreeing that the current model doesn’t meet these needs, the LGH Emergency Department has received no additional resources to support the increased workload caused by access block. While the Workload Tool Working Group has meetings scheduled though until December 2021, our members working in the LGH Emergency Department cannot wait this long for action, they are at breaking point now,” said Ms Shepherd.

After numerous attempts by the ANMF and its members to work through these issues in a collaborative way, the ANMF will now lodge a dispute with the Tasmanian Industrial Commission to seek assistance to obtain the urgent resources our members and their patients need.

“The ANMF will proceed to arbitration for an outcome if the Department of Health and Tasmanian Government do not show support and resources for exhausted nursing staff at the LGH Emergency Department during conciliation in the Tasmanian Industrial Commission.”

“This untenable situation has gone on for far too long and if the Tasmanian Government will not show leadership of their volition, then the ANMF will get them the help they need to do so through the Tasmanian Industrial Commission,” said Ms Shepherd.

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