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BHI report highlights a busy quarter for Hunter New England Health

Hospitals across Hunter New England Local Health District (HNELHD) experienced a record number of emergency department (ED) attendances in the October to December 2020 quarter, highlighted in the latest Bureau of Health Information (BHI) *Healthcare Quarterly report*.

District Chief Executive Michael DiRienzo said staff worked tirelessly from October to December 2020 to get the District back to its pre-COVID-19 position during an extremely busy holiday season for all hospitals.

“This quarter came at the back end of what can only be described as a mammoth year in health, with the COVID-19 pandemic and the after-effects of postponed elective surgeries,” Mr DiRienzo said.

“As the number of COVID-19 cases steadied, we saw an increase in the number of emergency department attendances across the District as we continued to recover from an unprecedented period for our health system.

“We remain focused on ensuring that those patients who had their elective surgery postponed due to the national cessation of non-urgent surgeries in response to COVID-19, receive their surgery as soon as possible. We’re continuing to work with our private hospital partners to ensure this happens.”

Overall, ED attendances across the District increased by 3.8 per cent, or 4,215 more attendances to 115,900 for the quarter. This was the highest quarterly number of attendances across the District ever reported by BHI.

The number of patients starting treatment on time was 73.1 per cent, and almost seven in 10 patients (69.4 per cent) left the ED within four hours.

There were 22,933 ED attendances at John Hunter Hospital from October to December 2020, 987 (or 4.5 per cent) more attendances than the same quarter in 2019. Like the District, this was the highest number of ED attendances in a quarter ever recorded at John Hunter Hospital. While this increase in demand meant there were some decreases in performance measures; more than seven in 10 patients still commenced their treatment on time in the ED.

The hospital also reported that 87.6 per cent of 6,556 patients were transferred from ambulances to the ED within the 30-minute benchmark.

Hospitals across the District experienced similar increases in ED attendances during the October to December 2020 quarter, including Belmont Hospital with an increase of two per cent or 146 more patients than the same quarter in 2019, up to 7,601. Gunnedah Hospital experienced an increase of 4.9 per cent or 121 more attendances, up to 2,576; Manning Hospital had an increase of 3.4 per cent or 297 more attendances, up to 8,925; Moree Hospital had an increase of 10.7 per cent or 261 more attendances, up to 2,698; and Narrabri Hospital had an increase of 12.1 per cent or 147 more attendances, up to 1,365. Maitland, Manning, Moree and Belmont all had record attendances this quarter.

The District's rural and regional hospitals have worked hard this quarter to improve ED wait times and time to treatment.

At Armidale Hospital, 66.9 per cent of patients started treatment on time – an increase of 12.4 percentage points compared to the same quarter in 2019. It also achieved 75.4 per cent of patients leaving the ED within four hours.

Similarly, at Gunnedah Hospital, 83 per cent of patients started treatment on time, a 16.4 percentage point improvement, and at Narrabri Hospital, 87.9 per cent of patients started treatment on time, a 3.2 percentage point improvement.

“Considering the increase in emergency department attendances we have seen in our rural and regional hospitals, I am proud of how hard our staff have worked to reduce wait times and ensure our patients are seen as soon as possible,” Mr DiRienzo said.

Elective surgery

Hospital staff across the District worked hard to ensure almost all (99.9 per cent) of the 1,722 urgent elective surgeries were performed on time.

“Of the District's 15 hospitals captured in the report, six hospitals ranked perfectly for performing elective surgeries on time, which is a great effort,” Mr DiRienzo said.

Across the District, 8,137 elective surgeries were performed during the October to December 2020 quarter, compared to 7,386 during the same quarter in 2019 – a significant increase of 10.2 per cent.

“The quarter was extremely busy for elective surgery for the District, with an 11.2 per cent increase in urgent surgeries, a 13.5 per cent increase in semi-urgent surgeries, and a 10.4 per cent increase in non-urgent surgeries, compared to this time in 2019.

“Given the demand for surgery and the delays caused by the postponement nationally of elective surgery earlier in the year, we have seen an expected decrease in the percentage of procedures performed within recommended time frames, and an increase in waiting times, particularly at our larger hospitals.

“I can assure the community we are providing the best possible care to our patients and will continue to work on improvements in our hospitals.”

Since March 2020, the NSW Government has committed more than \$3 billion to increase the capacity of the health system, including \$458.5 million to fast-track elective surgeries. This boost in funding has helped bring the 2020-21 Health budget to a record \$29.3 billion.

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