



NEW ZEALAND RESIDENT DOCTORS' ASSOCIATION

MEDIA RELEASE

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DHBs Support Fatigued Surgeons Continuing to Work

The new collective agreement on offer to a small group of surgical registrars represented by Specialty Trainees of New Zealand (STONZ) makes clear the country's twenty District Health Boards (DHBs) have a total disregard for the health and wellbeing of their doctors, and through them the safety of their patients. Under the misguided assumption that an unfounded risk to training trumps the health and safety of doctors, the DHBs are endorsing a collective agreement that will see fatigued surgeons continuing to operate on patients.

"It is extremely disappointing that the DHBs are endorsing unsafe work practices in their offer to STONZ," says Dr Deborah Powell, National Secretary of the New Zealand Resident Doctors' Association. "Patient safety and doctor wellbeing in the public health sector is taking a massive step backwards. They are going back to the dark ages of allowing surgical registrars to work twelve consecutive days in a row, including up to three sixteen-hour days during this stretch. It must be evident to all that there is no commitment from the DHBs to support good health and wellbeing of Resident Doctors or even, through them, the safety of their patients."

In 2016 and 2017 over three thousand RMOs took strike action in support of reducing consecutive days worked from twelve to ten, in order to help address concerns around doctor fatigue and, as a result, patient and public safety.

"It is perhaps telling that just earlier this month the NZRDA held a Health and Wellbeing Conference which discussed important topics such as fatigue, and included personal case presentations by doctors suffering burnout. It's telling that not a single DHB Chief Executive attended this conference, confirming the priority they place on this important issue to the doctors," says Dr Powell.

The DHBs are aware of our survey data around the risks of unsafe rostering, which include comments from resident doctors such as:

- “12 days straight, surgical run, forgot to order CT scan on patient as missed it somehow during the round as I was so tired as it was the last day of 12. Subsequent delay in diagnosis of internal bleed and deterioration requiring blood products and admission to HDU - patient survived thankfully.”
- “Working a 72 hour on call from Friday to Monday morning in a surgical specialty, I had a combined total of 4 hours of sleep. Fortunately, there were no complications as a result of any clinical decisions or surgeries over this period. At the end of my 72 hours of on call (8am on the Monday), I then worked through a normal working day to 5pm and continued to work normal working hours through the rest of the week including another 24 hours on call on the Wednesday. Although surgery was my passion, I no longer work in surgery because of these kind of working hours.”
- “I had a car crash on the way home after a long day on general surgery because I was so tired I mis-read the traffic lights and went through a red light. My SUV was written off. Luckily no one was hurt.”
- “RMO colleague fell asleep behind wheel [while working a general surgical placement]. Fell asleep and could not step on the brakes in time. rear ended car in front.”
- “Missed diagnosis of perforated gut towards the end of a long weekend working as a general surgical registrar (48hr continuous call).”

“Our 2016 survey of resident doctors indicated that more than 91% of us were worried fatigue had led us to make a clinical error. It is only a matter of time before these fatigue related mistakes made by doctors on the unsafe rosters allowed because of this new agreement, end in serious harm,” Dr Powell concludes.

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Resident Doctors

Resident doctors (RMOs, or Resident Medical Officers) are registered medical practitioners, and range in experience from first-year qualified doctors to those with more than 12 years' experience. They primarily work in the public sector, where they are employed by all 20 District Health Boards. Resident doctors staff New Zealand's public hospital system, delivering 24/7 care to patients, and also utilise this time to gain specialist qualifications as surgeons, physicians, paediatricians, etc. Resident doctors are also employed in general practice as GP trainees.