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Type of file: Microsoft Word Document

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Location: G:\OCHO\Advisory Group\Quality Policies & Liaison

Size: 39.5 KB (40,448 bytes)

Size on disk: 40.0 KB (40,960 bytes)

Created: Tuesday, 22 March 2005, 4:33:38 PM

Modified: Tuesday, 22 March 2005, 4:33:38 PM

Accessed: Today, 30 September 2005, 12:00:00 AM

Attributes:  Read-only  Hidden  Archive

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Title: Surgical Services at Bundaberg

Subject:

Author: FitzgerG

Category:

Keywords:

Comments:

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## Surgical Services at Bundaberg Hospital

### Suggested response

#### Background

- The Chief Health Officer was asked to investigate concerns raised by staff at Bundaberg Hospital in regard to clinical outcomes in the surgical unit. The report of the review is not complete and has not yet been provided to the Senior Executive Director-Health Services. The Chief Health Officer is awaiting some peer group hospital benchmarking data in order to compare outcomes.
- Dr Patel is a graduate of the Saurashtra University, India, and has spent almost 20 years as a practising surgeon in the USA. He was appointed as an 'area of need' doctor at Bundaberg Hospital in April 2003 and is currently the Director of Surgery at Bundaberg.
- Concerns have been raised, particularly by nursing staff, in regard to Dr Patel. The allegations are that he has significantly increased rates of adverse outcomes, tends to take on or retain cases that are beyond the capacity of the Bundaberg Hospital and is argumentative and dismissive of some staff members, particularly nursing staff.
- However, it is worth noting that Dr Patel is also very industrious and has significantly reduced elective surgery waiting times. He is very active in teaching of junior medical staff and is well regarded by his medical colleagues. There have been no significant complaints from patients or their relatives.

The CHO has met with members of the staff at Bundaberg Hospital and collected data on patient outcomes. When the report is finalised it will be provided to the zonal and district managers through the Senior Executive Director-Health Services.

- The key findings to date are:
  - Procedures have been performed at Bundaberg which are beyond the capacity and facilities of the Bundaberg Hospital. The hospital executive, in collaboration with clinicians, should define service levels for the hospital using the Queensland Health Service Capability Framework which outlines the minimum support services, staffing, safety standards and other requirements to facilitate the delivery of safe and appropriately supported clinical services. The Medical Superintendent has taken action to limit the scope of surgery performed by this surgeon and to ensure that critically ill patients are appropriately referred to higher level hospitals.
  - Concerns were raised regarding the rates of wound dehiscence (break down). The data have shown that this rate is reducing.
  - Concerns were also raised regarding the rate of unplanned re-admissions. This rate also appears to be reducing.
  - With regard to other complications, these concerns relate particularly to the more complex procedures. Benchmarking data suggest that, for

one complication, Bundaberg Hospital appears to have a higher rate than other similar hospitals, however, this has not been tested for statistical significance.

- There is significant conflict within the workplace which requires attention by the hospital administration and behavioural management strategies put in place.
- The significant issue regarding the competency of Dr Patel appears to relate to his preparedness to take on cases which are beyond the capacity of the Bundaberg Hospital and possibly beyond his personal capacity. There is no evidence that his general surgical skills are inappropriate or incompetent.
- However, the fact that he has taken on those cases may reflect significantly poor judgement to a level which may be grounds for disciplinary action by the Medical Board. Thus, the CHO has recommended that this matter be referred to the Medical Board for attention.
- I have prepared some suggested response points as below. I have also enclosed a draft of the report.

**Suggested Response:**

- I have now been informed of concerns raised by staff at the Bundaberg Hospital in regard to some general surgical services provided at the hospital.
- The Chief Health Officer, Dr Gerry FitzGerald, has undertaken a review of clinical outcomes at the hospital and is currently finalising his report.
- Dr FitzGerald has identified a number of issues of concern at the hospital and will be making recommendations in regard to those concerns.
- There is insufficient evidence at this time to take any particular action against any individual, and to suspend anyone would be unjust and inappropriate.
- The Bundaberg Hospital has taken certain action to limit the scope of some general surgery performed at the hospital which should address the majority of issues raised by staff. The report will also make recommendations regarding the management of staff conflict at the hospital.
- However, the report has also identified that there is a relatively high satisfaction amongst patients and that waiting times for elective surgery have been reduced considerably in recent times. Junior staff have been very complementary in regard to the teaching and guidance provided to them.
- However, Dr FitzGerald has raised concerns about the clinical judgement exercised by one member of staff and will be referring these concerns to the Medical Board for consideration