

NEWS

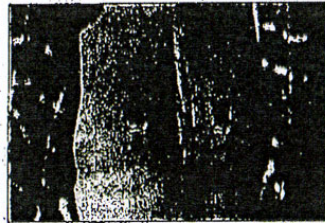
# Heart op waiting list triples

RUTH HILL

THE number of seriously ill patients waiting for heart operations at Wellington Hospital has tripled since 2000, an internal report says.

This week Health Minister David Cunliffe ordered an independent review on cardiothoracic services at Capital and Coast District Health Board after revelations that patients had died waiting for surgery.

In a letter to Hawke's Bay Hospital cardiologists in November after the death of a patient, Capital and Coast's chief executive at the time, Margot Mains, said manage-



## ► CARDIAC CRISIS

While the waiting list grows, the number of operations at Wellington Hospital has stayed static, at about nine a week, for the past two years.

Health Ministry figures show Capital and Coast's rate of coronary artery bypass operations was almost 30 per cent below the national average in the year to June 2007. Heart valve replacements and repairs shrank from 22 per cent above the national average in 2004-05 to 22 per cent below average last year.

ment was concerned about "the growing waiting list and the associated clinical risk". It had been working on the problem as a matter of priority for 18 months. However, the waiting list had been increasing because of more acute

cases, industrial action and staff shortages — particularly anaesthetists, theatre and ward nurses.

The number of patients waiting longer than the recommended six-month government guideline for surgery ballooned from one to 126

in the two years to July.

*The Dominion Post* understands at least one person has been waiting longer than 14 months for a heart bypass operation.

Capital and Coast chief executive Derek Milne said the number

waiting longer than six months was now down to 108 and the board was focused on reducing it further.

National Party health spokesman Tony Ryall, who obtained the letter and the internal report, said it was obvious that Capital and Coast and the Health Ministry had known for some time that cardiothoracic services in the lower North Island were under stress.

It was debatable what another review would achieve.

"Despite billions of extra dollars in the health system, more Wellington heart patients are waiting, they are waiting longer and for some that wait may be fatal."

The crisis was further evidence

of the Government's "lack of workforce planning", with staff shortages blamed for numerous cancelled operations every week.

"What's needed is a new partnership with the health profession that unshackles our clinicians and gives them greater trust to run their hospital services to provide more care."

In the letter to clinicians, Mains — who quit abruptly at the end of last year — said the board was working to clear the patient backlog. Operations were being done every third Saturday, as well as contracting operations to Otago DHB and St George's Hospital, Christchurch.