

Heart patients sent to Australia

Up to 50 heart patients are being sent to Australia for life-saving surgery in a bid to clear a backlog of patients at Wellington Hospital.

The deal with Sydney's Mater Hospital is set to push the Capital and Coast District Health Board further into debt as it grapples with a \$40.4 million deficit.

Chief executive Ken Whelan would not say how much the contract would cost, but admitted it was more than Capital and Coast could afford.

"Patients come before money and we are currently in talks with the ministry about that."

A private heart bypass operation in New Zealand costs between \$30,000 and \$40,000. To send patients to Australia, the health board also has to pay for flights and accommodation for the patient and one support person.

There are 155 patients on the waiting list, of whom 25 have been waiting longer than the six-month maximum government guideline.

Capital and Coast's clinical leader of cardiothoracic surgery, Barry Mahon, said the deal with Mater Hospital was "an appropriate one-off measure".

The service had successfully slashed the waiting list since last July, when the number waiting longer than six months peaked at 120. In the past year, patients had been sent to Otago, Auckland, Waikato and Christchurch, but there was still a "a backlog of high priority patients", he said.

"In that context, the decision to outsource to an Australian hospital with the capacity to perform that surgery within the next three months makes sense."

The first patient and his partner are expected to travel to Australia today for surgery on Monday.

Increasing elective referrals and emergency demand, capacity constraints and industrial action by staff had all put the service under stress.

Health Minister David Cunliffe ordered an urgent review of the service in February after revelations that patients had died while waiting for surgery.

Capital and Coast's chief medical officer, Geoff Robinson, said it was preferable for patients to have surgery in New Zealand, but there was little capacity beyond the arrangements the board already had in place.

"Those who choose not to go to Australia will retain their place on the waiting list here."

National Party health spokesman Tony Ryall said the deal was good news for patients, but it showed how bad the cardiac waiting list had got in Wellington. "It's not an isolated case, as waiting lists at other DHBs are just as bad."

Government restrictions on long-term contracts between DHBs and private hospitals were preventing better arrangements for patients in New Zealand, he said.

Heart Foundation medical director Norman Sharpe said Capital and Coast had made excellent progress in the past two years, and the latest move was a reasonable stop-gap measure.

Are you waiting for heart surgery? Contact us at news@dompost.co.nz