

1 May 2020

Doctors caught in cross-fire over funding for waiting lists

Queensland Health has reached a “Mexican stand-off” with the Federal Government and private hospitals over funding to reduce the ballooning public elective surgery waiting list with patients and doctors trapped in the cross-fire.

Australian Medical Association (AMA) Queensland Vice President Dr Chris Perry said Queensland Health was pressuring private doctors to sign contracts offering reduced salaried rates with restrictive conditions, under the guise of being a COVID-19 service.

“This is not about COVID-19 anymore. The fear of a surge in cases has hopefully passed and we can work to keep COVID numbers low,” Dr Perry said.

“The current shift of work from the public hospital system into the private sector is now about reducing the chronic public waiting lists.

“Queensland Health appears to be using the public-private partnership designed to combat COVID-19 and partially funded by the Commonwealth Government to help pay for the backlog in Queensland elective surgery cases and it wants doctors to foot the bill.

“There is pressure on doctors to sign unfair contracts that would obligate them to prioritise public patients over their own at below-par pay to reduce public elective surgery waiting lists.

“Meanwhile, public patients on waiting lists continue to suffer and wait.”

Dr Perry said Queensland Health put on extra medical staff in hospitals during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis and could do that again to manage their surgical waiting lists.

“We have warned our members not to sign these contracts,” he said. “They will essentially indenture themselves to providing surgery on public patients at the discretion of Queensland Health with no capacity to end the agreement or terminate the contract.”

AMA Queensland spokesman Dr Chris Zappala said Queensland Health needs to come to the table with a fair, reasonable fee-for-service model if it wanted to hire private doctors to help reduce its waiting lists.

“This has occurred in the past and can occur again without the exploitative tactics currently seen and the Mexican stand-off over funding,” he said.

“Private doctors have the expense of running their practices and paying their own staff. They can’t survive financially on the rates Queensland Health is offering, nor with the uncertainty of patient load. Some contracts dictate public patients take priority but there’s no guarantee how many will come across to the private sector.

“There are operating theatres sitting idle and patient beds empty in every hospital in this state and Queensland Health is more focused on taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic and penny-pinching rather than delivering care to patients. It’s a disgrace.”

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