

24 June 2024

Mr Michael Walsh
Director-General
Queensland Health

By email: [REDACTED]

Subject: Inappropriate and unsafe executive interference in clinical decision making at Caboolture Hospital

Dear Michael

AMA Queensland members have contacted us to report increasing concerns about ambulance ramping and associated unsafe interference in clinical decision making by senior hospital executives at Caboolture Hospital.

Doctors have reported that patient safety is being put at risk with several incidents of senior executives interfering in Senior Medical Officer (SMO) decisions about patient prioritisation and assessment. Clinicians also state the executive interference is divisive and workloads are unsafe, pushing staff beyond breaking point and further compromising patient care.

Our members have provided the following examples of relevant executive actions to illustrate the issues at the hospital but advise such incidents are occurring with increasing frequency:

- Executives directing SMOs to prioritise patients ramped in ambulances over higher category patients in the ED waiting room (e.g. prioritisation of Cat 3 ramped patients over Cat 2 patients in the waiting room).
- Executives pressuring staff to empty the ED leading to the inappropriate use of ward procedural rooms, recovery areas, corridors, alcoves and high care areas instead of treating patients appropriately within the ED.
- Executives pressuring surgical SMOs to leave very sick ward patients to see less unwell ED patients that are approaching relevant ED time limits.
- Executives threatening SMOs with disciplinary action if they do not present to the ED instead of doing necessary result checking.

- Executives directing wards to accept patients from the ED irrespective of ward circumstances, workloads or time of day (e.g. even where ward staff are busy with very sick patients at night or when there are fewer staff).
- Executives using and pressuring nursing staff to provide them with reports on SMO activity.
- Executives warning staff against complaining, leading to colleagues urging each other to be careful about expressing alternative views to those of the hospital's executive.

Staff have advised that the workforce is suffering because of this interference and there are regular occurrences of doctors crying at work or vomiting from work-induced anxiety. They are of the view that the hospital is not providing a psychologically safe workplace, in breach of its legislative obligations, and has opened too many beds without first recruiting the medical staff needed to service them.

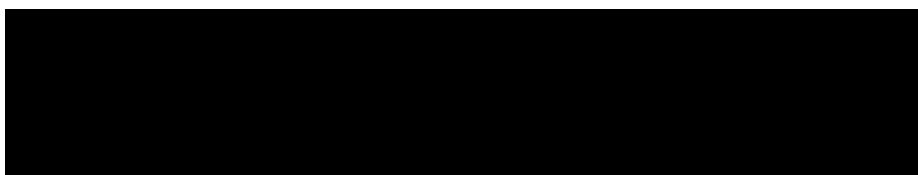
As you know, such pressures on our doctors and nurses can result in increased risks to patients but, concerningly, clinicians state responses from senior executives to such concerns have been ignored or met with defensiveness and indifference.

We note some of these concerns are similar to those raised in our correspondence to you and the Minister in January regarding the Cairns Emergency Department. We understand there have been some changes at Cairns Hospital since that time and seek any update you can provide on those issues.

AMA Queensland urges Queensland Health to ensure there is no executive interference in clinical decision making at any hospital and health service to protect patients and staff wellbeing. We also support our members' views that new beds must not be opened until there are sufficient medical and nursing staff to service them safely and sustainably.

We understand the existing pressures on all health services across Queensland but believe that the above incidents as reported to us, if not dealt with, will impact retention and recruitment, and further exacerbate an already stressed workforce. We would appreciate your response to the concerns raised in this letter.

Yours sincerely



Dr Nick Yim
President
AMA Queensland

Dr Brett Dale
Chief Executive Officer
AMA Queensland