

PHA CONCERNED ABOUT HEALTH-RELATED CONFLICTS OF INTEREST FOR HEALTH BOARD MEMBERS

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The Public Health Association (PHA) is concerned that people sitting on both District Health Boards (DHBs) and local bodies could be putting economic development ahead of health.

PHA National Executive Office Dr Gay Keating says DHB members are obliged under the NZ Public Health and Disability Act to act in the best interests of the health of the local population. However members who also sit on their local council could find themselves in a conflict of interest situation if the plans of the council can mean poorer health for residents.

“There will be times when the interests of the town or city in terms of economic development may mean someone who is on both the health board and the council find themselves driving something for the council that may not be in the best interests of people’s health.

“For instance, the council might be involved in developing a traffic plan, which will result in local residents being exposed to increased traffic noise and vibrations, and more dust and fumes. In a case like this the development of the city may contribute directly to poorer health for some of its residents.

“This is an example of a conflict of interest, and a situation in which the person cannot properly do the job they were elected to the health board to do.

“The DHB must work to improve the social and environmental condition of the district. The DHB must oppose the council in cases like that.”

Dr Keating says this situation is becoming increasingly common around the country.

“Concerns have been expressed to me by people working in public health in at least four DHBs. They see members of the local health board who are also on the city council, but appear not to be aware that holding both these roles may pose a conflict. Of course, some local politicians manage the potential for conflict very professionally.

“There has been an outcry about the conflicts of interest at Hawke’s Bay District Health Board relating to contracts and finance. We are raising this issue so

members of the DHB and the public can be aware that conflicts of interest can also exist when politicians have obligations for the Council concerning economic wellbeing but obligations solely for people's health when they sit on the DHB."

Dr Keating says the PHA will now concentrate on getting further details from those who have expressed concern, and is likely to raise the issue again with the Ministry of Health and possibly with the Minister of Health.

For further information:

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The Public Health Association of New Zealand is a non-party political voluntary association, which provides a major forum for the exchange of information and stimulation of debate about the health of the public in New Zealand.