

MEDIA RELEASE, Friday, 29 April 2011

### **PHA calls for reinstatement of reducing avoidable hospital admissions health target**

The Public Health Association (PHA) is calling on Minister of Health Tony Ryall to reinstate the reduction of avoidable hospital admissions as a health target, particularly for children.

The PHA's call comes after the release of findings from an Otago University study showing the rate of children admitted to hospital with serious skin infections has doubled since 1990.

"These findings are an indictment of a supposedly first world nation," says the PHA's National Executive Officer, Dr Gay Keating.

"The hospital admission rates revealed by the study are the direct product of a failure of successive governments to make children a priority, of the absolute shortage of houses, of family poverty and the health services not getting in early enough".

Dr Keating says New Zealand's rate of child immunisation has improved greatly since it was made a health target. She says reinstating the reduction of avoidable hospital admissions, especially for children, would be a great first step toward improving New Zealand's shameful record on childhood infectious diseases.

"It's not only responsible and wise to focus on the country's youngest and most vulnerable, but it is also helpful in easing the pressure on front line staff and reducing hospital waiting times for other New Zealanders needing hospital beds."

For more information see below or contact:

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### **Hospital admissions that should have been prevented**

*What's a preventable admission?*

While there are many theoretical and academic debates about exactly how to classify whether an admission to hospital could have been prevented there is general agreement that there are many conditions which, for most of the time, either

- should not ever have happened in the first place or
- should have been picked up early and fixed in the community so that the condition did not ever deteriorate so such an extreme state that specialist care in hospital is needed.

In New Zealand up to about 30 percent of admissions to hospital have been classified as "Should have been prevented". (Health of New Zealanders 1999, Ministry of Health [www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/fe9d9e667cc713e9cc257011000678d8/6910156be95e706e4c2568800002e403?OpenDocument](http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/fe9d9e667cc713e9cc257011000678d8/6910156be95e706e4c2568800002e403?OpenDocument) pp326 - 335).

The medical system can do relatively little to reduce the rate of hospital admission of some of these (such as road crash injuries which can be prevented by median barriers, lower speed limits and reduction in drunk driving).

But many (such as skin infections, gastroenteritis, asthma and lung infection, heart disease in young people, secondary heart damage from rheumatic fever) are conditions that can be prevented or treated early in the community by effective health services. These are sometimes described as "ambulatory sensitive hospital (ASH) admissions".

### *Previous priority and national targets*

Reducing ambulatory sensitive hospital (ASH) admissions had previously been a national priority with targets for DHBs. Reporting on the target priority gave evidence not only of improvements in numbers, but also described actions taken in particularly successful DHBs.

[www.health.govt.nz/webfm\\_send/17](http://www.health.govt.nz/webfm_send/17) (see pp 86-91)

“Hawke’s Bay DHB has achieved ASH rates for children below the national average through a comprehensive approach based on the Child Health Strategy. Most initiatives have been developed and sustained by nurse leaders, with significant input from the DHB’s Māori Health Unit, and support from paediatricians. The initiatives include:

- screening for domestic violence, with appropriate referral to community agencies
- increasing the number of specialist nurses working in the community, e.g. a specialist children’s respiratory nurse
- a visiting nursing service that provides ‘hospital in the home’ care for children
- a paediatric assessment unit that sees 1500 children per year
- training ward staff in primary care options, improving discharge planning.”

Nationally there were 1120 fewer avoidable admissions in 2007/08.

### *Where do serious skin infections fit?*

Skin abscesses and cellulitis are one of the ASH conditions most readily prevented and open to early treatment, as discussed in the paper by C. E. O’SULLIVAN, M. G. BAKER\* AND J. ZHANG *Increasing hospitalizations for serious skin infections in New Zealand children, 1990–2007.*