



Surgery out of reach for thousands

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Around 170,000 Kiwi patients cannot get on a publicly-funded elective surgery waiting lists, new research shows.

The first research in a decade has measured the levels of unmet elective surgery need in New Zealand.

Global market research firm TNS conducted the random survey of almost 2000 Kiwis on behalf of the Health Funds Association of New Zealand (HFANZ) and the New Zealand Private Surgical Hospitals Association (NZPSHA).

The research found 280,000 Kiwis meet the clinical threshold for elective surgery, but only 110,000 have been formally placed on a waiting list.

The remaining 170,000 cannot get on a waiting list.

Those most likely to fall into the unmet need category were society's most vulnerable; Kiwis over the age of 70 and those from low income households, the research found.

"While both public and private elective surgery has increased over the past decade, elective need has clearly been growing much faster as the population ages," HFANZ chief executive Roger Styles said.

However, Health Minister Tony Ryall criticised the survey, saying it was paid for by private health insurers "who are looking to drum up business".

"The fact is almost 160,000 New Zealanders will get elective surgery this year, 40,000 a year more than when we came in. This big increase has put pressure on the private health insurance business, with their policy numbers declining," he said.

Ryall promised "another big boost for elective surgery" in next year's budget.

The research found that more than half of the 280,000 Kiwis who need elective surgery say their quality of life was worse than it was five years ago.

A quarter of the 280,000 who meet the clinical threshold for needing elective surgery have had to take time off work due to the pain.

NZPSHA president Greg Brooks said: "As well as the human cost, the survey also points to a huge economic cost to the country in the form of lost productivity from illness and absenteeism."

Both organisations cautioned against throwing public money at a few thousand more elective surgery operations - saying that approach may actually be part of the problem.

"All available information says future public health spending is unsustainable under present policy settings. There are options to address this, but the longer the problems are ignored, the less effective and less palatable the solutions become," Styles said.

The survey included at least 120 respondents from each of the large DHBs and 30 respondents over the age of 70.



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