



Kids wait longer on surgery lists

KELLY ANDREW

CHILDREN are being forced to wait more than a year for operations because of a lack of resources, and paediatric surgeons say a crisis is looming.

Access to paediatric surgery had fallen at main hospitals in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch in the past 12 months despite growing demand, New Zealand Society of Paediatric Surgeons president Brendon Bowkett said.

"Children are waiting excessive times for elective surgery and families experience repeated cancellations.

"In essence it appears that children are being squeezed out of the public system," he said. "When demand is going up but access to operating theatres is going down, I'd call that heading towards a crisis."

Operating time for paediatric surgery at hospitals in Christchurch and Wellington was about 6 per cent below contract. In Wellington, children's operations, for problems such as hernias and undescended testes, had been cancelled to allow for adult surgery, Dr Bowkett said.

Nursing shortages in the three main centres had been a critical factor in operating lists being cut.

Children in rural areas needing less urgent operations were flooding hospitals in major cities because of a

lack of resources in smaller towns.

This was causing unacceptable delays and cancellations for city children waiting for elective surgery. Dr Bowkett said a system meltdown was imminent unless improvements were made.

"Across New Zealand now it is not uncommon for many children to wait well over a year for elective surgery with waits of 18 months or more not out of the question.

"There is not enough operating time to deliver the service, and we're not able to deliver care within the margins that we would consider reasonable."

In one disturbing case, a mother who was told her child would have to wait years for surgery to correct a congenital deformity increased her house mortgage by thousands of dollars so she could pay for private surgery.

Capital and Coast surgical services business manager Chris Lowry said theatre capacity was limited and increased demand for emergency surgery had caused delays for children.

At the end of the 2004-2005 year the board was about 58 patients behind on its schedule of planned surgery.

An extra paediatric surgeon hired in January had boosted the number of operations, and in the first two months of this financial year it had caught up and was 24 patients ahead of schedule.