



# National: We'll end false hopes

Patients must be told the truth about public hospital operations, says party

by Ruth Berry  
political reporter

National says it will be more frank with the public about which operations they will not get in public hospitals, so people can try to save for a private one.

It is signalling plans to introduce a "commitment to service", spelling out what people can expect, arguing Labour has raised false expectations about its ability to reduce public hospital waiting lists.

New Zealand First has a similar aim, wanting an inquiry before establishing a "public health compact" stipulating the guaranteed minimum service the public can expect.

Both parties want to boost uptake of private health insurance at the same time, with NZ First flagging tax rebates for those buying it.

The pledges come amid an ongoing — and for the public, confusing — battle about the way waiting-list figures are collated, as politicians of all hues proffer select figures only to argue their point.

National has yet to release its health policy, but health spokesman Paul Hutchison said: "There is a case for bringing in over time a commitment to what services the public health system is prepared to offer."

The Government claimed to provide key health services but a number of basic medical procedures were simply not being

done.

"Common things such as hernias, haemorrhoids, gall bladders and varicose veins are no longer done in public hospitals unless they are very severe.

"That's really a dishonesty in the system, it's bad for the individual, it's bad for the economy because they are kept off work.

"It's important for the public to know so that they can make their own decisions as to what they can either save for themselves or to have realistic expectations."

Health Minister Annette King said: "The Labour Government refuses to rule out any particular clinical procedures in the public system. If a clinician says a procedure is serious enough to be done, then it should be done in the public system.

"Dr Hutchison needs to explain to New Zealanders who have not got the ability or means to save for an operation just what will happen to them as National cuts back on Vote Health to pay for tax rebates, resulting in an inevitable run-down of the public health system."

Dr Hutchison and Act health spokeswoman Heather Roy also claim the existing method of recording people waiting for specialist assessments and surgery is dishonest and incomplete.

Ms King also campaigned on a more "honest" waiting list policy while in Opposition and maintains the existing system — introduced by National and adapted by Labour — has achieved that.

Opposition MPs are simply frustrated because the new structure means it's impossible to properly compare past lists with today's, she says.

In 1996, 89,000 New Zealanders were on waiting lists with no certainty of when they would receive treatment.

Many patients were treated in order of their length of wait instead of their level of need compared with other patients.

National introduced the new booking system in 1998.

Labour then introduced six month benchmarks — the time in which a person given a commitment to a procedure could expect to have it done.

National and Act define the total "waiting list" as the total number of people waiting for a first specialist assessment and the numbers waiting for an operation — sometimes including both those given a commitment to surgery and those who are not — a figure of about 180,000.

Ms King says the waiting list should be defined as those people who have waited longer than six months for an assessment or operation.

She says those numbers have dropped since 2001, particularly for operations where the numbers waiting longer than six months has halved.

Less clear is how high the bar is before people will be referred for assessment or surgery.



## »»The numbers

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## WAITING LISTS

**In the third day of our in-depth coverage of health as an election issue, we examine hospital waiting lists — now more controversial than ever as Opposition politicians claim the Government is hiding the real numbers.**

### TOMORROW

» Are hospitals wasting tax-payers' money?

**119,106**

people waiting for their first specialist assessment for surgery

**16,384**

of them waiting longer than 6 months

**27,722**

people waiting for surgery

**7796**

waiting longer than 6 months

**27,072**

people who qualified for surgery placed on 'active review' by their health boards.

**3982**

people who were on 'active review' referred back to their GP for monitoring.

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Latest NZ figures for May 2005.  
Source: Ministry of Health. HERALD GRAPHIC