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Patients 'need to be sicker to get surgery'

PATIENTS need to be sicker to qualify for elective surgery than they did four or five years ago, despite a massive rise in health funding, the National Party says.

Figures obtained by party health spokesman Tony Ryall show patients in Wellington, the Auckland region and Otago now need to be sicker to get an operation in key specialties. That is despite an increase in the health budget of more than 40 per cent, from \$7.2 billion in 2000-01 to \$10.2 billion in the current year.

The disclosure of the figures won the backing of the senior doctors' union, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists.

"This ... is consistent with the experience of senior doctors in many parts of New Zealand who, unlike health bureaucrats and politicians, have to deal with the practical, despairing and at times tragic realities every day," executive director Ian Powell said.

But Health Minister Pete Hodgson said that view was simplistic, with figures reflecting a change in how hospitals dealt with waiting lists.

Prioritisation was better than several years ago, meaning those getting surgery might be on average sicker, but those left on the waiting list were less so. "These days we have a system which is fairer," he said.

In Wellington, patients in orthopaedic, eye, general, gynaecology, dental and ear, nose and throat need to be sicker to get an operation than four years ago.

Some cardiothoracic patients must also be sicker.

The biggest rise was in dental surgery, where patients must score 80 points — 50 points up on three years ago.

Ear, nose and throat patients needed to score 50 points, compared with 30 four years ago.

Non-cataract eye surgery patients needed to score 41 points, up from 20, and joint replacement patients needed to score 71, up from 60. — NZPA