

Overloaded hospitals are a ticking time bomb

Queensland doctors say public hospitals are at crisis point, with clogged emergency departments, too few beds and an exodus of burnt-out staff.

AMA Queensland member and Australian College for Emergency Medicine (ACEM) spokesperson Dr Kim Hansen said it was the worst Emergency doctors had seen.

“There’s been a surge in patients this year – most hospitals are seeing record numbers and they just don’t have the staff or beds to cope,” Dr Hansen said.

“The system was already at full capacity and now it’s swamped.”

Dr Hansen said there were common reports of patients stuck for hours in waiting rooms and ramped ambulances.

“Emergency departments are the canary in the coalmine,” she said. “They bear the burden when other parts of the health system are over capacity.”

“Emergency doctors and nurses are happy to work hard to see all the patients but they can’t do it well if they have to practice ‘waiting room medicine’.

“It’s awful, like putting a Band Aid on a stab wound.”

AMA Queensland president Professor Chris Perry said the access block could not be fixed without hundreds more hospital beds and staff in Intensive Care, mental health and general wards.

“Queensland has the lowest number of mental health inpatient beds per capita in Australiaⁱ – mental health investment has not kept up with health funding as a whole, so people can’t get help in the community and end up in crisis at an ED,” he said.

“We also have hospital beds occupied by people waiting to get Home Care or disability packages or into aged care.

“The bed shortage is everywhere – metropolitan and regional Queensland.”

Dr Hansen said the strain was a vicious cycle for staff.

“Being unable to properly treat the flood of patients is incredibly stressful and more Emergency doctors are choosing to work fewer hours or quit altogether,” she said.

Professor Perry said people would die if the access block was not fixed.

“Clearly, we have far too few hospital beds to cater for the state’s booming population,” he said.

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ⁱ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/specialised-mental-health-care-facilities/mental-health-beds-and-patient-days>