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Protecting Tamariki: Concerns Regarding Adult Patients in Paediatric Wards

Joint Statement from the Paediatric Society of New Zealand | Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians

The Paediatric Society of New Zealand | Te Kāhui Mātai Arotamariki o Aotearoa (PSNZ) and the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) are increasingly concerned by the practice of placing adult patients in paediatric wards across Aotearoa. While we acknowledge the growing demand on hospital capacity, this approach raises significant clinical, legal, and ethical issues and must not become an accepted norm.

A Widespread and Escalating Issue

Reports from clinicians across Aotearoa indicate that placing adults in paediatric wards is now common, particularly in our regional hospitals. This includes a wide range of adult patients with no clinical rationale for being in a paediatric setting, such as general medical or surgical admissions.

This practice is occurring despite clear standards. The [Australasian Standards for the Care of Children and Adolescents in Health Services \(2008\)](#) state that children and adolescents should be physically separated from adult patients and cared for by staff with appropriate expertise. Paediatric wards are specifically designed, clinically and developmentally, to meet the needs of tamariki and rangatahi. They are not equipped, staffed, or intended for adult care.

Co-locating adults with children or adolescents in paediatric wards poses serious risks to both groups. It can compromise the safety, rights, and developmental needs of tamariki, particularly if adult patients present physical, psychological, or emotional risks, or if paediatric staff and equipment are not suited to adult care. It also impacts care by diverting paediatric expertise away from children, while adult patients may experience an environment not designed to meet their needs.

Clinical and Operational Risks

- **Paediatric teams are not trained or supported to manage adult emergencies,** medication protocols, or comorbidities. This creates risk for both patients and staff.

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- **Adult patients may delay or disrupt paediatric admissions**, reducing access for acutely unwell children.
- **Communication and handover systems** often fail when adult teams are expected to manage patients in physically separate paediatric spaces.
- **Ward policies and safety systems** differ significantly between paediatric and adult services, compounding the risk of error.

Child Protection and Whānau Trust

The presence of unfamiliar adults in paediatric environments can compromise the safety and wellbeing of tamariki and breach the trust of their whānau. These wards are designed to be safe, developmentally appropriate spaces. Co-locating adult patients undermines this and raises legitimate concerns under the **Vulnerable Children Act 2014** and **Te Tiriti o Waitangi**.

Adult patients are sometimes placed in shared bays or nearby rooms without informing or consulting whānau, despite clear expectations around age-appropriate care environments.

Workforce and Retention Challenges

Paediatric staff consistently report moral unease, professional discomfort, and increased clinical risk when required to care for adults in a paediatric setting. This affects morale, retention, and confidence in clinical governance systems.

A Call for National Direction

We call on Te Whatu Ora, and sector leaders to:

- Acknowledge the seriousness and impact of this issue.
- Reaffirm the need to protect paediatric wards as **dedicated spaces for children and young people**.
- Develop clear, nationally consistent guidance to prevent or strictly limit the placement of adults in paediatric spaces.
- Support hospitals with the tools and resourcing needed to preserve safe, child-focused care even under system pressure.

This issue cannot be addressed through local workarounds alone. A system-level response is needed to ensure that paediatric care environments remain safe, appropriate, and trusted spaces for tamariki and whānau.

Ngā mihi,

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