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NSW public hospital system “under siege”

The latest report on New South Wales public hospital Emergency Department waiting times shows a system “under siege”, a siege that could be alleviated if public hospitals stopped chasing profitable privately insured patients and put public patients first, Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) CEO Michael Roff said.

New figures from the Bureau of Health Information quarterly report show high numbers of patients stranded in public hospital emergency rooms waiting for treatment, which Mr Roff said was no shock to private hospitals.

“An unhealthy preoccupation with revenue targets has left NSW public hospitals faltering when they needed to step up to a surge in Emergency Department attendances, and blinded them to logical solutions that are within reach. NSW is one of the worst offenders when it comes to harvesting revenue from privately insured patients treated in their hospitals, this was always going to happen.

“Private hospitals, however, are willing to help with the crisis if the State will send insured patients to the private system – at no cost to the taxpayer,” he said.

The report also shows a concerning increase in elective surgery wait times for those without private health insurance in NSW.

“The report shows 50 percent of ‘non-urgent’ elective surgery patients had a wait time of more than seven months (231 days) after being assessed as needing surgery. This is worse than a year ago,” he said.

Mr Roff said privately insured patients should be offered the choice they pay for with their insurance – to go to a private hospital for care.

“Privately insured patients stranded in public emergency departments should be given the option of transferring to a private hospital. But also, patients should be given this option when clinically appropriate from the moment they are collected by ambulance – this is something Queensland has adopted.”

He said revenue targets needed to stop being put ahead of patient care in the public hospital system.

“We know public hospitals aggressively target privately insured patients when they arrive at emergency departments. When people are sick and need care, what we need to provide them with is access to care – not holding them up in emergency rooms to get sicker.

“Public patients should be the priority for public hospitals, not a money grab for private health insurance benefits,” he said.

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The Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) is the peak industry body representing the private hospital and day surgery sector. The private hospital sector treats 3.69 million patients a year, including treatment of more than a third of chemotherapy, 60 percent of all surgery, 74 percent of all elective musculoskeletal surgery and 79 percent of rehabilitation.