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IAEM highlights deteriorating Emergency Department staffing issue

On 10th March 2010, the Irish Association for Emergency Medicine brought public attention to the severe difficulties Ireland's Emergency Departments (EDs) were experiencing recruiting Non Consultant Hospital Doctors (NCHDs) to staff them. Since then the situation has deteriorated with some EDs consistently unable to fill shifts with doctors of the necessary experience to safely manage patients. While this problem is at its most acute in Naas General Hospital; Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe; Mayo General Hospital, Castlebar; Kerry General Hospital, Tralee and Letterkenny General Hospital almost every ED in the country has been unable to recruit its full complement of medical staff.

Where there are alternative EDs in reasonable proximity, it may now be necessary for hospitals that cannot safely staff their EDs to close or limit their opening hours. Arrangements will have to be made to transfer patients elsewhere outside these hours. While this may appear to be a disproportionate response to the problem, the reality is that some of these EDs cannot be guaranteed to provide safe care for patients.

With further reductions in the number of NCHDs and changes in registration and training post recognition due to take effect on 1st July 2010, the situation is likely to deteriorate significantly.

It is imperative that the HSE now decides where it is going to provide 24 hr ED services for the population. If EDs cannot provide a safe service, they should be closed or have their opening hours restricted to periods when they can provide a safe service. At the same time those EDs that will receive an increased workload following such reconfiguration must be given the infrastructural and staffing facilities to provide a safe 24 hr ED service.

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