



SOAS Press Release

11th September 2023

FOI disclosures reveal Public Health Authority director was 'uncomfortable' with sign off on 'temporary' closure of emergency surgery at SWAH.

Public Health director at PHA referenced their input as 'rubber stamping' in a 'tick box' exercise.

Hospital campaign group, Save Our Acute Services, has revealed that a response received to one of their Freedom of Information requests showed concerns being expressed by the public health director of the Public Health Authority over the removal of general surgery at South West Acute Hospital (SWAH). The decision by WHSCT board management led to the 'temporary' removal of urgent and emergency surgery at SWAH leaving residents across Fermanagh having to travel up to two and a half hours to access emergency surgery at Altnagelvin.

In an email sent by Public Health Director at the Public Health Authority, Joanne McClean, on November 14th 2022 about the PHA endorsing the proposal from WHSCT chief Neil Guckian. She stated, 'I'm uncomfortable with requests to input/rubber stamp decisions and recommendations made by the Trusts (certainly in the SWAH case) we have not been sighted on. We seem to be being asked to input to something to tick boxes rather than provide meaningful input at this stage.'

The response confirms that the PHA was not informed of the likelihood of general surgery being removed from the hospital. The PHA director also questioned the extent of consultation with the Southern HSCT and also the assertion by WHSCT that there would be no financial impact from the decision.

In an email from November 16th, the same Director stated that the PHA could not comment on pathways/bypass protocols, likely transfer numbers and the implications for other hospitals as they were not previously involved. As such, the request for them to provide 'required approvals' for the decision to close general surgery was 'difficult'.

On 6th December 2023, deputy public health director of the PHA, Brid Farrell contrasted the situation surrounding the closure at SWAH with that at Daisy Hill hospital in Newry where an earlier Pathfinder initiative in that area had focussed work on the provision of specialties in the absence of emergency surgery. By comparison, the Pathfinder project run by the WHSCT 'was not focussed on specialties' and this meant that the PHA was still seeking information on systems of assessment and investigation, the number of transfers and their impact on other hospitals.

SOAS spokesperson, Donal O'Cofaigh, said that the FOI responses compounded concerns around the process under which the decision to remove urgent and emergency from SWAH was made.

"The Public Health Authority, the body responsible for providing health protection and health and social well-being improvement, felt itself wrong-sided by the sudden request by WHSCT bosses to remove general surgery from SWAH. This was despite the fact that the Trust identified the potential closure in its own Risk Register and were already investigating transfer pathways months beforehand.

"In the absence of 'required approvals' from the PHA, there remain uncertainties over who signed off on this closure. It is clear that the groundwork normally required before such a highly significant decision was not undertaken in the case of removing general surgery from SWAH -as it had been done in Daisy Hill.

"Yet again we see the failure of Western Trust senior management. They appear to have totally failed to engage with

the PHA ahead of what was a momentous decision for our community. This is further evidence why we can have no confidence in the WHSCT board or executive and why we are calling for the Department of Health to intervene over their heads and commit to a process of restoring local access to this vital and life-saving treatment to our community."

ENDS...