

Save Our Acute Services (SOAS): Press Release

9th January 2024

*** Department of Health Permanent Secretary has no mandate to permanently remove vital services***

*** Save Our Acute Services challenges Health Department moves to change 'goal-posts' on health care services***

*** Individuals urged to challenge legal adverse experiences resulting from removal of urgent and emergency surgery from SWAH ***

Campaign group Save Our Acute Services has challenged the democratic mandate of the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health to make permanent decisions to approve the withdrawal of vital services from hospitals. The call came after the Department of Health approved the permanent withdrawal of emergency general surgery from Daisy Hill hospital in Newry. The decision by the Permanent Secretary raises obvious concerns for South West Acute Hospital where the emergency general surgery has now been withdrawn for over a year leaving more than 83,000 residents almost two hours away from life-saving provision.

Save Our Acute Services seeks a commitment to restore urgent and emergency surgery at SWAH. The group is disturbed that a range of policies have been changed unilaterally by the Department of Health in recent months to enable decisions to be taken which previously would have required Ministerial assent. The group challenged the absence of any democratic mandate for such decisions.

Spokesperson for Save Our Acute Services, Donal O'Cofaigh said,
"The decision to approve the permanent removal of emergency surgery from Daisy Hill hospital is highly concerning and demonstrates how unelected and unaccountable senior civil servants are assuming powers which previously were subject to locally-elected and accountable Ministers. When emergency general surgery was removed from SWAH - a decision which meant the loss of acute and emergency surgery - the legal situation was that the Permanent Secretary did not have the powers to make such a decision permanently.

"Legislation was introduced in June of last year to give **them extra powers** which have now been used. This represents the latest in the ongoing erosion of accountability and democracy. In addition to this the Department has moved the goalposts in a series of policies meant to guarantee basic equality of access to life-saving treatments - in each case the result is the community in Fermanagh is being further disadvantaged.

"The Department of Health changed the **major trauma triage toolkit (MTTT)**, used by every ambulance driver to respond in cases of trauma, to remove the requirement for trauma patients to receive treatment within 45 minutes. The '**Call and Send**' protocol, which controls how patients with trauma are dispatched between hospitals, has also been changed to exclude SWAH. The Department has also redefined what is a '**Type 1 Emergency Department**' to allow that terminology to be retained for SWAH even though the current provision is more like an 'acute medical unit' than an emergency department. Indeed, as SOAS revealed, the WHSCT leadership are now openly discussing renaming SWAH to better reflect its downgraded status.

"The decision by the Department to approve the temporary removal of emergency general surgery at SWAH was made at an un-minuted meeting, without adequate safety measures or controls, without a risk assessment or capacity assessment. We have to question what is driving this indecent haste to make permanent these cuts to vital local services."

The Department's decision to approve the permanent removal of services at Daisy Hill was justified on the grounds that there had been no adverse incidents arising since its 'temporary' removal.

Senior WHSCT management continue to deny any adverse incidents at SWAH despite multiple documented adverse incidents being documented and publicised over the last year, including in both the local and regional press. SOAS urge members of the public who have experienced poor outcomes to make sure that they formally pursue them to ensure the same excuse cannot be used to justify the removal of services from SWAH.

ENDS...

For further information or an interview with a campaign representative, contact Donal O'Cofaigh, SOAS spokesperson tel. 07375 530941.

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Notes:

1. New powers given to Permanent Secretaries.
2. Changes to Major Trauma Triage Tool (MTTT) – bypassing SWAH. Refer to FOI Request

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From: Redmill, Duncan

Sent: 15 November 2022 14:08

*To: Michael Bloomfield; Doctor Ruddell; McLaughlin, Russell; Hampton, Gareth; Emma Giddings (HSCB)
Cc: Gillespie Mark; Lillis Darren; Crawford Ian; Rosie Byrne
Subject: FW: PDF changes
Importance: High*

Colleagues

*We have been working with WHSCT and others over the past weeks to consider the implications on our trauma network which may be imposed with the removal of emergency surgery from SWAH.
After consultation I have made amendments to the MTTT to account for the changes.
It was felt better for NIAS if we did not produce multiple documents and so we have amended the network MTTT to include the changes. Please examine the document and feed back to me with suggestions /proposals.*

Kind regards

*Dr Duncan Redmill
Consultant in Emergency Medicine
Lead Clinician Northern Ireland Major Trauma Network
Royal Victoria Hospital*

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*From: Hampton, Gareth
Sent: 17 November 2022 11:50
To: Michael Bloomfield ; Doctor Ruddell; McLaughlin, Russell
Subject: RE: PDF changes*

*I have replied to Duncan that I think the suggested changes are reasonable.
Do you have idea on where the patients who are bypassing will go? And how many to each site?*

Will a patient with a stab wound go all the way to RVH or stop at CAH??

I know the number of patients is not big I do have to be clear with the team.

*Thanks
Gareth*

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