

Patients shunning

EXCLUSIVE

By KATE SIKORA
Health Reporter

IT IS a damning indictment of what the NSW public thinks of its health system — a deserted waiting room at Royal North Shore Hospital's emergency department.

Only a week ago the same waiting room was crawling with people and staff so busy they were unable to attend to a woman who miscarried in a toilet.

Staff yesterday told *The Daily Telegraph* they had never seen the ward empty and were concerned patients had turned their backs on the hospital.

As the exclusive photograph on Page 1 shows, the waiting room at 1.15pm yesterday was like a ghost town — with critically ill patients choosing to attend other Sydney hospitals.

The decline in admissions follows a week of horror stories emerging from the hospital.

A nurse in the hospital's emergency department told *The Daily Telegraph* the waiting room had never been empty.

"We have never seen it like this — it has been like this since last week when all the attention started," he said.

"Normally there are at least 20 to 30 people and we are run off our feet."

The only people entering through the hospital's emergency doors were the elderly or those who were being transported via ambulance.

"All we are doing is restocking supplies," the nurse said.

"There is nothing we can do but we have to turn up for work."

One person who has vowed not to return to Royal North Shore is Cathy Wastell of Cromer, who was given a bucket for her miscarriage in 2005.

"I received excellent care in the foetal department but I would never go back to emergency," she said last night.

"I have lost faith in the system — I can understand why people would not want to go there."

Mrs Wastell, who now has a one-year-old daughter Mia, was at Royal North Shore for six hours before being told to put her lifeless baby in a bucket.

"I was bleeding profusely and a nurse gave me a fresh sanitary napkin. That was the level of medical care I received," she said.

As the State Government refuses to accept the health system is in disarray, it has also emerged that paramedics are having to store critically ill patients on the floor of ambulances.

Yesterday *The Daily Telegraph* revealed the Ambulance Service was spending \$53 million in overtime because of staff shortages.

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Paramedics have said there are now serious concerns a death will occur because crews are being delayed for hours at blocked emergency departments — leaving no ambulances to respond to urgent medical calls elsewhere in the city.

"If we are stuck in the emergency department and an urgent call comes through, then one of us has to stay behind with the bed while another officer attends the job," the paramedic, with 15-years service, said.

"We have had to place patients on the floor.

"I don't like working overtime ... some do it because there is just not enough ambulances out there."

Health Minister Reba Meagher was last night holding a crisis meeting with hospital emergency department heads to address the litany of problems.

Doctors and nurses are split over whether a Howard Government plan to install local hospital boards will improve patient care or lead to an abdication of health planning.

Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd has attacked the plan even though his own \$2 billion health policy states "regional and local communities would directly participate in the management of public hospitals"

And Health Minister Tony Abbott denied the plan would add yet another layer of bureaucrats to health care management and said hospital board members would "work for the love of it and not the money".

Australian Medical Association president Dr Rosanna Capolingua said local hospital boards would "bring management responsibility right back to the community".

"It is a good idea," Dr Capolingua told *The Daily Telegraph*.

The NSW Nurses Association feared the Howard Government would use local boards to "meddle in the employment conditions of nurses and other hospital staff".

But mother of two Therese McKay, who publicly condemned Royal North Shore Hospital as having the conditions of a "third world country" after her husband Don died last May, welcomed the plan.

"At least with hospital boards it is more personal, you can go and speak to someone and thrash it out," she said.

"After Don died I tried to make a complaint and it was like shadow boxing, no one was listening."