



Wendy Gao ... "my GP told me I'm lucky to be alive".



Therese Mackay ... "the stuff of nightmares".

Alexandra Smith

ONE of the state's most senior intensive care doctors broke down as he gave evidence to a NSW parliamentary inquiry into North Shore Hospital.

Another leading specialist described sections of the hospital as "Third World squalor".

Patients and relatives also recounted their horror stories of treatment at the hospital, including one woman with a burst appendix who waited more than eight hours for surgery and a quadriplegic who chewed through tubes so he could yell "help me" to his wife.

Jana Horska, who miscarried in a hospital toilet, and her husband, Mark Dreyer, wept as they gave evidence to the inquiry.

Mr Dreyer recounted the night in September when his

14-week pregnant wife went to Royal North Shore with fears she was about to lose their baby. Ms Horska's miscarriage prompted the inquiry, which has taken evidence from more than 30 witnesses.

Mr Dreyer said that despite being in acute pain, Ms Horska was not seen by a doctor and was told just to sit and wait her turn.

When they asked for urgent treatment, staff made them feel like they were trying to "jump the queue".

Mr Dreyer told the inquiry that after Ms Horska miscarried in the toilets she had felt a heartbeat, saw legs move and the live foetus had appeared to open its mouth in an attempt to breathe.

A distraught Ms Horska said that shortly after, one nurse said to her: "Don't worry. My mother has had heaps of miscarriages."

"They were so cold, so cold towards me," Ms Horska said.

Malcolm Fisher, area director for intensive care and critical care, could not bring himself to finish reading a letter to the inquiry from a mother, whose teenage son died in the intensive care unit after a car accident.

An emotional Professor Fisher told the inquiry that he had "suitcases" of letters from relatives thanking staff for the treatment their relatives received despite them working in an ageing and poorly resourced hospital.

A colleague of his, the intensive care director Ray Raper, told the inquiry he was embarrassed that he once defended the hospital's dilapidated condition, and after seeing other NSW hospitals "the squalor of Royal North Shore is even more apparent".

"Royal North Shore Hospital has been very badly let down by the department," Dr Raper said. The bed shortage was a "public planning disgrace".

Dr Raper told the inquiry that 25 per cent of patients who had been discharged from intensive care had to wait more than 24 hours for a bed in a general ward. "If that doesn't show that we need new beds, what does?"

Another witness, Therese Mackay, whose quadriplegic husband, Don, died after being treated in the hospital, told the inquiry that the five weeks he spent in intensive care was "the stuff of nightmares".

She said the unit was filthy and old and that the staff showed no compassion towards her husband, who broke his neck in a work accident in 1982.

Her husband was so distraught

and uncomfortable, he even chewed through tubes to get Mrs Mackay's attention.

"There was little compassion shown to my brave husband," Mrs Mackay told the inquiry.

Another patient, Wendy Gao, said she went to the hospital on a Sunday night with agonising stomach pains. She was sent home but when her condition worsened she returned two days later. Her appendix burst but she was not operated on until the Wednesday night.

"My GP told me I am lucky to be alive," Ms Gao said.

The inquiry also heard that plans to redevelop the hospital would only deliver an extra 27 new beds, which would fall short of meeting future demand.

The Minister for Health, Reba Meagher, said this week that the \$702 million redevelop-

ment would result in the hospital having 626 beds, including 46 critical care beds and 40 mental health beds.

The hospital's director of trauma, Tony Joseph, said Ms Meagher's comments to the inquiry were the first time that number had been revealed.

"Thus the new hospital will provide a total of 27 more beds than the current total of 599, which is a concern, given the projected population growth for the northern part of Sydney," he said.

Dr Joseph said he had done a recent snapshot survey of the hospital and found that 10 out of 24 wards at the hospital's main clinical services block had been closed or converted to "other non-inpatient services".

An additional 25 beds could be opened today, he said.

"There is bed space at North

Shore at the moment; there is a ward they could open tomorrow, with some cleaning, which has got 25 beds. It hasn't been used for some time; it's a little bit old but it's vacant."

He said the hospital had been in a "subtle decline" over the 17 years he had worked there, the main problems being poor financial management, patient access and staff morale.

He also said there was a need to employ full-time cleaners, rather than contract cleaners, and to immediately abandon the practice of placing patients in mixed wards.

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VIDEO

Jana Horska gives evidence

