

Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Research reveals increasing importance of regional Emergency Departments

A growing number of residents in Tasmania's North West are accessing health services for non-life threatening conditions at the region's emergency departments because it is the most efficient way for people to get care if they believe urgent help is needed or tests are required.

A research paper published in the international journal, *Emergency Medicine Australasia*, has revealed the increasing role of emergency departments in meeting community health needs across the region.

Conducted by the University of Tasmania's Rural Clinical School, the study investigated why an increasing number of low-acuity self-referring patients presented at the emergency departments of the Mersey Community Hospital and North West Regional Hospital.

The findings indicated that patients perceived emergency departments as health hubs offering wide-ranging treatments and diagnostic services such as x-ray and pathology, and meant they didn't have to visit several different locations.

Co-author of the research paper, Colleen Cheek from the Rural Clinical School, said patients in the region are choosing to visit health facilities which will give them the most efficient care in line with their needs, and that is why the self-refer emergency department figures are increasing.

"The single biggest factor impacting on people's decision to attend the emergency department was their perceived need for x-rays, other tests or interventions which are not provided elsewhere in the community," Ms Cheek said.

"The number of people presenting at the North West emergency departments with low-acuity symptoms is three times greater than in a metropolitan study because in rural areas we don't have a comprehensive alternative service in the community."

Despite a national focus to redirect people away from these locations because of higher demand, Ms Cheek said enforcing that action for patients in the North West region would be detrimental.

"What this research paper shows is that investing resources to re-direct patients to GPs is not likely to alter demand for ED care in this region unless the alternative service also offers

point of care convenience. In a rural area with a smaller population replicating these resources is likely to be more expensive.

“Residents in Tasmania’s North West still value going to their GP for usual care but when they feel they need to access treatments for more urgent conditions and further tests, they elect to go to the ED. People in this region seem to be making good decisions about their health as the GP is referring patients to the Emergency Department for similar reasons.”

Researchers examined a snapshot of self-referring emergency department patients presenting at both hospitals in December 2014.

They identified if low-acuity patient numbers visiting Emergency Departments continued to grow, it would have implications for the region’s hospitals in terms of cost, funding, infrastructure and staffing.

“Regional hospitals may not look as efficient as metropolitan hospitals because of the disproportionate numbers, and that can affect future funding.

“We need to make sure that any future healthcare funding models accurately compensate them for this work,” Ms Cheek said.

“We hope this paper will start a conversation about how important emergency departments are for the North West region and that financial support should reflect this going forward.”

The research paper can be viewed [online](#).

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