

Warning over delays in diagnosis

By TOM FITZSIMONS - The Dominion Post
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Diagnoses of diseases such as cancer and HIV could be mistaken and delayed because of a chronic staff shortage, pathologists warn.

Specialists are working longer hours, turnaround times are increasing and there are concerns about supervision of results at some laboratories, they say.

Pathologists are medical specialists who play a crucial role in diagnosing cancer and other diseases such as diabetes and HIV from blood and tissue samples.

The profession says it needs 30 per cent more workers to bring it into line with Australia, which is considered to have a workforce crisis.

Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia chief executive Debra Graves met Health Minister Tony Ryall last week to discuss the problem.

"Pathology remains at crisis point in New Zealand," she said. "[The shortage] means longer turnaround times, which is always a concern ...

If you're waiting to know if you've got cancer, that's a stressful enough time as it is."

It also increased chances of mistakes.

The college's New Zealand vice-president, Richard Steele, said some laboratories in New Zealand might not have "optimal" supervision of machines that analysed data from samples.

There were 148 full-time equivalent (FTE) pathologists nationally, about one for every 20,000 people. Australia had one for every 15,000 people.

The number of New Zealand FTE pathologists was 159 in 2003, Dr Steele said. Pathologist numbers needed to increase by a third.

Another 67 people were training to be pathologists, "and even then we may not actually meet the demands".

The biggest shortages were for chemical pathologists and microbiologists, while the new field of genetic pathology was also under-represented in New Zealand.

Mr Ryall said the Government had moved to address serious health workforce shortages.

Pathology was one of the "hard to staff" specialties that graduate doctors could choose in exchange for student loan writeoffs or cash incentives that were in a voluntary bonding scheme announced in February, he said.