**Sterile supply issues under control: DHB**

By *Eileen Goodwin*

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| [1]  Southern District Health Board chief medical officer Dr Nigel Millar and director of quality Tina Gilbertson. Photo: Craig Baxter |

A Public Service Association (PSA) organiser has called for an independent investigation into Dunedin Hospital sterile supply practices because of "grave'' concerns about shoddy practice.

The Southern District Health Board says the matters raised by the PSA have been fixed, or are under review, or are being phased out.

The board stopped the multiple use of a single-use gynaecological item, and introduced a protective sleeve for a laparoscopic camera cord rather than wiping it clean, in response to concerns raised by a sterile supply staff member, organiser Julie Morton said.

But Mrs Morton is not satisfied, and said there was a "pattern'' in how the board handled sterile supply issues.

It reacted to specific concerns when it had to, but senior staff often took a dismissive view, she said.

The staff member raising the issues over a long period had been "vilified'', and had needed support from his union.

Budget concerns had been cited as a justification for poor practice, she said, a suggestion the board has rejected.

Store-bought pliers used in orthopaedic surgery were withdrawn after a complaint in November 2014, but the union then had to fight for removal of equipment made in-house which was prone to corrosion and leaking, Mrs Morton said.

Mrs Morton said the equipment was not made to a high standard, and posed an infection risk.

"It's not that they were making their own equipment, it's that they're making and using substandard equipment.''

Because of a "reactive'' approach, the underlying problem remained, and that was a risk to patient safety, MrsMorton believed.

Mrs Morton has called for an investigation involving the Ministry of Health, and notification of potentially affected patients.

The issue has emerged because the *Otago Daily Times* obtained a copy of an April 7 email from Mrs Morton to commissioner Kathy Grant and chief executive Carole Heatly, and the *ODT* approached Mrs Morton for comment.

"Our PSA member who continues to try and deal with this on the front line is not thanked for his efforts, but rather vilified for his professionalism.

"The DHB is risking giving patients infections, introducing dangerous substances into their bodies and not providing patients with informed consent,'' Mrs Morton's email said.

Chief medical officer Dr Nigel Millar said yesterday he was confident there was no systemic issue in respect of sterilisation practices at Dunedin Hospital.

The hospital continued reusing a single-use gynaecological item for a "short period'' after the distributors' advice changed.

"It's not ideal, [but] we don't believe it creates a significant infection risk,'' Dr Millar said.

The time lag was because of a communication issue, Dr Millar said, but for 40 years it had been acceptable to clean and re-use the item.

There was no need to notify patients potentially exposed to unclean equipment.

Dr Millar said it was disappointing the staff member felt vilified.

"I think that's really important, that staff should be able to raise things.''

Budget concerns played no part in sterilisation processes, he said.

The board was phasing out the use of surgical equipment manufactured in-house, which had been a widespread practice in the health sector.

Dunedin Hospital's last item made in-house would be removed next month.

A PSA complaint about urology equipment carrying peroxide residue would be investigated, and the practice of sterilising equipment for four GP practices was under review, Dr Millar said.

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