



HIGH HOSPITAL OCCUPANCY LEVELS ARE MAKING US SICK

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON SUNDAY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2010

High bed occupancy and emergency department (ED) overcrowding are bad for patients, staff and the system itself, according to an editorial in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

In the editorial, Dr Sally McCarthy, Director of Emergency Medicine at the Emergency Department, Prince of Wales Hospital, Sydney, discusses hospital occupancy levels and ED overcrowding.

Dr McCarthy said that reducing the number of hospital beds, and increasing occupancy above 85 per cent in the name of operational efficiency, has clearly had a negative effect, as the demand for hospital beds in Australia exceeds supply.

“The root cause of the problem will remain unless hospital capacity is addressed in an integrated approach at both national and state levels,” Dr McCarthy said.

In an accompanying article in the *MJA*, Dr Andrew Keegan, Adjunct Associate Professor at the Sydney Medical School, University of Sydney, said that high bed occupancy rates have been shown to be associated with greater risks of hospital-associated infection and to have a negative impact on staff health.

“Clinical observational data have suggested that bed occupancies above 85 per cent could adversely affect safe, effective hospital function,” Dr Keegan said.

“There is an urgent need to develop meaningful outcome measures of patient care that could replace the process measures currently in use.”

In a second accompanying article in the *MJA*, Dr Rodney Jones, Statistical Advisor at Healthcare Analysis and Forecasting, Camberley, Surrey, UK, said that occupancy and hospital size are linked and, therefore, hospital size is important when examining occupancy levels.

“Current methods used to calculate the required size of hospitals are underestimating the true capacity needed for operational efficiency,” Dr Jones said.

“Trends in occupied bed-days, rather than admissions and length of stay, give better estimates of future bed requirements.”

Dr McCarthy said that failure to acknowledge the causes and consequences of high bed occupancy is seen in well-publicised health system responses to incidents that have occurred in overcrowded EDs.

“The solutions proposed in response to these incidents so far have not included fixing the underlying reason for the patient being stuck in the waiting room – lack of hospital capacity.”

The *Medical Journal of Australia* is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.

The statements or opinions that are expressed in the *MJA* reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the official policy of the AMA unless that is so stated.

CONTACT:	Dr Sally McCarthy	0410 600 302
	Dr Andrew Keegan	0408 621 341
	Dr Rodney Jones (UK)	0011 44 07890 640 399