

Media release 6 July 2017

Drastic under-resourcing of DHB neurology services means NZ is falling well short of internationally-approved standards of care for people with multiple sclerosis

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of New Zealand (MSNZ) is extremely concerned about the negative impact of the current shortage of neurologists and multiple sclerosis (MS) nurses in DHBs around New Zealand.

“The shortage of funding for these specific medical professionals is leading to increased and prolonged waiting times for both people diagnosed with MS, and those awaiting neurology appointments to determine a diagnosis,” says MSNZ Vice-President Neil Woodhams.

“New Zealand currently has just over half of the neurologists it should have given its population,” he says.

An article in the August 2015 New Zealand Medical Journal said that New Zealand should have one neurologist per 70,000 people in order to meet internationally-approved standards of care. This equates to 65 neurologists for a population of 4.5 million.

“New Zealand only has 37 full-time equivalent neurologists employed in DHBs across the country. This figure is a disgrace. Unfortunately, we believe that New Zealanders are being conditioned to accept this level of service as the norm,” says Woodhams.

“The NZ health system is already seriously short of neurologists and the position will only get worse, with 50% of current neurologists due to turn 65 in the next 12 years. DHBs need to allocate more funding to employ and retain both New Zealand-trained and international neurologists.

“As a result of these shortages, neurologists, MS nurses, and other staff are being placed under intolerable pressure to try and provide an adequate service. It is unfortunate that DHB management is not supporting their efforts with increased resources.”

Woodhams describes examples of the effects that the shortage is having on New Zealanders with MS. “The waiting times for people to see a neurologist are unacceptable. Rotorua has only 19 neurology clinic appointment days per year, and Auckland has one neurologist per 160,000 people. In Taranaki and South Canterbury people are waiting four months for an initial appointment and in Palmerston North we have reports of people waiting 15 months for a follow-up.”

Delays such as this are critical for people with MS as early diagnosis and treatment are crucial in limiting and managing the often irreversible, progressive deterioration caused by the condition.

It is not only the lack of neurologists and specialist nurses that are causing delays, says Woodhams. “Currently, access for specialist assessments, MRIs and other diagnosis and monitoring procedures are not provided in a timely manner by many DHBs. We know this because of a recent OIA request made to New Zealand DHBs.

(continues on pg 2)

“In Canterbury people were recently waiting more than six months for the results of MRI scans. Delays can mean that a person with MS cannot access the treatment they desperately need in a timely manner which may result in disease progression and disability.

“Positive steps in the treatment of MS have been made in New Zealand over recent years with four new drugs being funded in the last three years. However, the lack of resources means some people are unable to access these drugs and treatments,” says Woodhams.

ENDS

Media enquiries:

Neil Woodhams

MSNZ

Email nbw@xtra.co.nz

Ph 021 531 654

About Multiple Sclerosis:

- MS is a progressive disease of the central nervous system, for which there is no cure at present
- MS affects 2.3 million people worldwide
- More women than men have MS, with a global ratio of three women to one man
- Diagnosis of MS is generally between 20 and 40 years of age, although onset may be earlier
- MS attacks the nervous system. Symptoms can include sight loss, pain, fatigue, incontinence and disability
- Early diagnosis and treatment are important
- MS is unpredictable - one day you can be fine, the next you might lose your sight or be unable to move

About MSNZ:

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of New Zealand (MSNZ) is a non-profit organisation that advocates for systemic change so people with MS in New Zealand have access to first world treatment, resources and services to improve their well-being and quality of life. The work of MSNZ aims to reduce the burden of MS on those diagnosed, their carers and families. MSNZ provides support, information and educational resources to 18 regional societies supporting people living with MS in their communities.

For more information about MSNZ please email info@msnz.org.nz, call the 0800 MS LINE (67 54 63) or visit the [website](http://www.msnz.org.nz).