



GOVERNMENT OF GIBRALTAR

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Lack of planning of previous administration compounds bed shortages

The Government is deeply concerned that the bed situation at St Bernard's Hospital has reached crisis levels as a consequence of the lack of planning of the previous administration. On Monday night four patients aged between 74 and 99 had to spend the night in the Accident & Emergency Department, as there were no beds available in the appropriate wards.

Once again, this has unfortunately led to the cancellation of non-emergency operations. Equally as seriously, the ability of the hospital to admit either surgical or medical emergencies is seriously compromised.

In order to understand the size of the problem, it is important to note that the number of operations cancelled over the past six years due to non-availability of beds was as follows:

2006.	63
2007.	59
2008.	62
2009.	81
2010.	118
2011.	114

It must have been clear therefore to the previous GSD administration that the problem of bed shortages was increasing at an alarming rate. The complete absence of forward planning by the GSD and the failure to devise and implement a solution is simply unacceptable. This is the case especially as, whilst in Opposition, Minister Neil Costa had continually pressed the GSD on this very important issue and highlighting the systematic and structural problem. Whereas the GSD gave the Gibraltar Parliament various explanations, none of them excused their appalling failure to provide a sufficient number of beds.

The Government notes that the current crisis has been created as a result of a fundamental lack of understanding of the problems faced by our health service by the ex-GSD Government in general and successive GSD Ministers for Health in particular. It is clear that the GSD either failed to carry out or did not implement a proper assessment of medium to long term needs.

The failed solutions implemented by the GSD were short-sighted and short term, such as increasing bed capacity in some wards from 30 to 34. In tackling the reality of an increasing elderly population, the ineffectual answer of the GSD was to accommodate as many elderly people as possible in what should have been acute beds. For example two surgical wards were reduced to one, reducing the amount of surgery possible and mixing trauma and non trauma patients in the same ward, which is neither advisable nor desirable. There are nearly 80 long-term patients, mainly elderly persons in St Bernard's Hospital.

The attempt to tackle the acute shortage of beds by planning a dementia home after almost sixteen years in Government is far too little too late. In fact the residential home is nowhere near completion and is having to be redesigned. In addition, the crucial policy shift to increase the community health service, including domiciliary care and health promotion was not made. This outdated approach to health care has left our health service in crisis.

That the GSD should have allowed this problem to worsen to the current state is unforgivable, not least as in answer to Questions the previous Minister for Health had replied to say that operation cancellations happen even in the Houston Medical Centre. Such flippant replies demean the very serious and real trauma experienced by patients awaiting an operation, in particular, in very serious cases.

Fortunately, the GHA counts with extremely committed and extremely hard working health care professionals who provide the highest quality care in what are difficult circumstances. The policy is to provide maximum care for all our patients, including the long term patients. Patients having to spend a night in A&E are provided with a proper bed and the full range of procedures. However, the situation is far from acceptable.

Commenting on the matter, the Minister for Health and the Environment John Cortes said: "The Government and the Gibraltar Health Authority are working hard on finding short term solutions to resolve the current critical situation whilst we urgently review the way we provide health care in order to find a long term solution to the problems facing health care provision in Gibraltar inherited from the previous Government. The GSD have a lot to answer for to the people of Gibraltar."

