



West Coast District Health Board

Te Poari Hauora a Rohe o Tai Poutini

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18 February 2020

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Official Information Request WCDHB 9382

I refer to your email dated 13th January 2020 requesting the following information under the Official Information Act from West Coast DHB.

- *I would like to see the numbers and cost figures for the past twelve months for medical transfers. But I would like to know if there has been an increase within that period so a break-down of flights by the month would be helpful.*

We are interested in the number and cost of medical patient transfers by helicopter, to and from Buller hospital. I understand there were three on Saturday afternoon alone and we are wondering why patients cannot be transported more cheaply by road? It's been suggested there may be a shortage of St John volunteers to drive or accompany them.

The questions are:

- *How often is this happening?*

The high number of patients transferred by helicopter from Buller at the recent weekend was an unusual occurrence; there were five patients transferred by helicopter, including three that were the result of accidents and two that were medical emergencies. Three went to Greymouth and one each to Christchurch and Nelson.

The decision to transfer the patients via helicopter was made by clinical staff based upon patients' medical conditions and care required. It was not due to any hospital staffing issue.

The number of inter-hospital transfers made by helicopter fluctuates from month to month; with the decision on mode of transport in all cases being very much dependent on the clinical condition of the individual patients needing to be transferred on for treatment at secondary or tertiary hospital facilities.

While it is certainly cheaper to transfer a patient by ambulance or motor car, and such modes are most commonly used wherever practical and appropriate, clinical consideration in individual cases of critical emergency takes precedence when determining to use air-frame based platform for transfer instead.

As requested by month, the number of inter-hospital helicopter transfers from Buller to other hospitals, made at DHB staff request, during 2019 was as follows (overleaf):

- January – 9
- February – 9
- March – 3
- April – 4
- May – 3
- June – 6
- July – 9
- August – 10
- September – 9
- October – 3
- November – 6
- December - 7

Note: This data is for helicopter transfers only and includes helicopter transfers for ACC-funded inter-hospital patient transfers but excludes inter-hospital transfers made from Buller by fixed-wing air ambulance aircraft during the year.

- ***Has it increased over the past year or so? If so, why?***

Please refer to the data above. The number of cases can and does fluctuate from month to month, with no particular discernible pattern of increase. The average across the year was 6.5 helicopter inter-hospital transfers per month. As noted above, transfers made by air retrieval (both by helicopter and also by fixed wing aircraft) over ground-based alternatives (ambulance or car) are very much based upon clinical need and urgency of the individual patients.

- **What is it costing the DHB?**

The cost of helicopter transfers vary dependent on destination and flight time, so each flight can be unique. On average, the current cost of a helicopter air ambulance flight from Buller to Grey is usually around \$5,455 per return trip. Helicopter transfers from Buller to Christchurch may range from \$15,750 to just under \$17,000 for a return trip, and those to Nelson from \$12,000 to just over \$15,000.

We are unable to provide overall costs in respect of specific modes of transport type used for inter-hospital transfers. Transfers of all type are coded to one account within the West Coast DHB, and there is no specific breakdown of information by transport mode, nor separating out for the Buller region. To endeavour to extract the figures for helicopter transfers (or other specific transport modes) would require a manual review, sorting and compilation of data from archived invoices relating to each individual patient transfer. As such, the information requested cannot be made available without substantial additional cost, collation and research. Because of that, we decline your request to provide this information under Section 18(f) of the Official Information Act on the grounds of substantial collation and research.

- ***I understand that if a patient is covered by ACC, the cost of the flight is covered by ACC - otherwise the DHB foots the bill.***

Yes – this is correct. ACC pays for inter-hospital transfers that occur within 24 hours of accident for those patients who have an accident-related event. West Coast DHB otherwise pays the cost for those inter-hospital transfers made at request of DHB staff.

I trust that this satisfies your interest in this matter.

You may, under section 28(3) of the Official Information Act, seek a review of our decision to withhold information by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz; or Freephone 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, or an edited version of this response, may be published on the West Coast DHB website after your receipt of this response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gullery', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Carolyn Gullery
Executive Director
Planning, Funding & Decision Support