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St George and Sutherland Hospital emergency departments perform well despite increased demand

Patients suffering chest pain symptoms now wait less time at St George and Sutherland Hospitals under a new initiative called the NSW Chest Pain Pathway project.

The latest Bureau of Health Information *Hospital Quarterly* report, released today, shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of patients being treated in the urgent triage Category 2.

The *Hospital Quarterly* report reveals the increase in emergency department patients was spread across the more urgent triage categories, with the volume of triage Category 2 patients increasing by 25 percent across the state; with an additional 10,826 patient being allocated to this group.

According to Dr Peter Grant, senior staff specialist, emergency department, St George Hospital, the increase is linked to the introduction of the NSW Chest Pain Pathway project.

“The NSW Chest Pain Pathway project was introduced in November 2011, and makes it mandatory that all patients suffering chest pain or other symptoms suggestive of myocardial ischaemia be triaged to an urgent category and seen to quicker,” Dr Grant said.

Myocardial ischaemia occurs when there is a lack of blood supply to the heart muscle, usually as a result of coronary artery disease. While chest pain is the most common symptom, sweating, shortness of breath, fainting, jaw pain or arm discomfort may be the main complaint. If untreated myocardial ischaemia can lead to irreversible damage to the heart.

“Those patients presenting to the emergency department with suspected cardiac ischemia are now automatically assigned to the more urgent triage Category 2 for treatment,” Dr Grant said.

“The pathway also expedites the care of selected patient groups such as diabetics, sufferers of chronic renal disease and the elderly, in whom myocardial ischaemia may produce atypical symptoms.

“Previously, patients who had chest pain, but were free of pain on arrival to hospital, would be allocated the less urgent triage Category 3,” he said.

A review of emergency department data from the previous quarter (January to March 2012) indicated that an additional 1,028 patients had been allocated a triage Category 2, compared to the same period last year; an increase of 44 percent at St George Hospital; and an additional 272 patients or 22 percent increase at Sutherland Hospital.

Dr Grant said this pattern has continued in the April to June 2012 quarter.

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“The increase in the number of triage Category 2 patients is also linked to the introduction of another successful initiative, the Sepsis Pathway. This Pathway identifies patients with potentially serious bacterial infections who should have intravenous (IV) antibiotics commenced within 60 minutes of presentation to the emergency department,” Dr Grant said.

St George Hospital’s emergency department – a major trauma centre and already one of the State’s busiest – treated more than 16,870 patients in the April to June 2012 quarter. At Sutherland Hospital, more than 12,171 patients were treated in the emergency department.

Dr Grant said both St George and Sutherland Hospitals had experienced significant increases in emergency department attendances, due to winter and also the ageing population.

“Emergency departments are busy places, but emergency patients will continue to be seen as quickly as possible. Our expert clinical staff are highly professional and will always work to provide the best possible care.

“Patients who are experiencing heart and breathing problems or who need urgent medical attention should always attend their emergency department or contact Triple 0,” Dr Grant said.

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