Hospital delays ‘put lives at risk’

By GEMMA BERRY

TOWNSVILLE Hospital has been slammed for risking lives following a sharp increase in the amount of time patients have been forced to wait for a bed after arriving in an ambulance.

Ambulance “ramping” in the Northern region has increased by 59 per cent, according to State Government figures released this week. A total of 1825 patients were forced to wait outside for more than the benchmark 15 minutes before being admitted to hospital in the 2009-10 financial year, compared to 1148 in 2008-09 – an increase of 677.

The number of patients waiting more than an hour increased from 32 to 34, but there was a drop in the number of patients waiting more than two hours, from 13 to five.

Opposition emergency services spokesman Ted Malone claimed the 59 per cent increase was putting lives at risk and costing taxpayers a fortune.

“The figures speak for themselves … ambulance ramping is out of control,” he said.

“It’s a costly disaster any way you look at it. It’s a monumental failure by the long-term Bligh Government to adequately resource and manage our overloaded emergency departments and the flow-on is seriously risking lives and wasting ambulance resources,” Australian Medical Association Queensland president Dr Gino Pecoraro said although the number of people waiting had increased, the waiting time had decreased.

“Ramping of ambulances and a lack of beds are major concerns for our members,” he said. “For someone who has required ambulance transportation it means treatment is paramount and should be timely. If they are spending time parked in a queue when they should be receiving treatment then I don’t think people would argue that lives are being put at risk.”

Dr Pecoraro said feedback from members suggested there was a chronic bed shortage at the hospital for emergency patients.

“So while they are improving and increasing the size of their Accident and Emergency Department, it isn’t going to fix this problem,” he said.

Townsville Hospital director of Emergency Dr Niall Small denied staff left patients outside in ambulances.

“According to the most recent data, 98 per cent of patients at Townsville Hospital were transferred off Queensland Ambulance Service stretchers into an emergency department patient care area within the benchmarked times,” he said.

“We are very proud of our track record with off-stretcher times and it is an important facet of the care we deliver in our emergency department.”

“Our emergency department remains one of the busiest in the state and our staff do an outstanding job.”

Statewide, in 2008-09 there were 108,795 instances of ambulances ramped for more than 15 minutes. This figure soared 20 per cent to 130,322 in 2009-10.

The number of patients waiting more than an hour jumped 26 per cent and the number waiting more than two hours rose 29.5 per cent.

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Storm front researchers garaged in new HQ

IT’S the safest way to test the strength of steel without having to wait for a cyclonic storm to buffet the city.

James Cook University’s Cyclone Testing Station has been operating since the 1970s but had a new home as of yesterday, thanks to Garage World.

The new facility will allow researchers to test wind tunnels, the impact of severe winds on building structures, wind loading and the level of damage caused by flying debris during cyclone events.

Cyclone Testing Station manager Cam Leitch said the new building research facility would help the facility to keep pushing for improved standards and better cyclone-resistant outcomes.

“The new facility means we can set up our air cannon, which fires a missile at different speeds to recreate wind-borne debris,” he said.

“We also do a fair bit of commercial testing and research into wind effects, components for low-rise buildings as well as community education.”

“We also have experts from insurance companies and the building code’s board of people who help us directly in our research and assess how projects are going along the way.”

Garage World business manager Will Emms said it was fantastic for the company to be involved in the Cyclone Testing Station.

He said the new building was officially unveiled yesterday.

“The station plays a really critical part in life up here. North Queensland where cyclones are a regular event, so it’s great to be involved,” he said.

Mr Leitch said the testing station performed a crucial role for industry, government regulations and for the community.

-- BROOKE BASKIN

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