

Whipps Cross University Hospital Trust Staff Side



To:

Whipps Cross University Hospital Trust Board Members

30th November 2006

CALL TO REVERSE DECISION TO CLOSE CONIFER WARD

Dear Board member,

Last weekend's extreme pressure on the hospital demonstrates how unsafe and impractical the decision to close Conifer ward is. Sunday night / Monday morning 12 patients were in beds overnight in A&E awaiting ward placement. By early Monday morning only 3 cubicles were available for any further admissions, the Trust had no critical care or coronary capacity. 17 elective cases were due in that day and a further 40 -70 emergencies anticipated over coming 24 hours. Neighbouring hospitals were asked if ambulances could be diverted there but were unable to cope.

Beds were taken out of Conifer, as it was closed to admissions in preparation for closure, then beds had to be found as the ward was again opened to admissions, staffing levels had been reduced and staff had to be called back in again. Is this sea-saw going to continue week on week? We were given assurance by the Director of Nursing that it would not be acceptable to close the ward, then when demand peaks re-opening it again with a cobbled together team. Conifer ward has a very good, experienced and committed team, demonstrated by the way they coped despite the reduced staff with the eight admissions over Sunday. By breaking up and dispersing such a team the trust loses far more than 23 available beds.

Through hard work of staff the situation has now improved, but the surge in pressures will inevitably occur again, if not this week then another. Last year it was January to April that saw the bed state on red alert most of the time.

Only a few Board members will have been around to remember first hand the days of 24 hour and more trolley waits in A&E - days we have long left behind. Their return was precisely a fear and prediction made by unions and others when the announcement of the ward closures was made.

Closure of Conifer is we believe against the recommendation of clinical staff. August to September figures show 95% bed occupancy on Conifer. By October 13th more patients had been cared for already than in the whole of last year representing a 30% increase on last year's activity if this trend continued. The only grounds given for closure are to achieve promised turnaround financial savings.

Our hospital has a duty of care to the community we serve to ensure that it has the facilities available to meet their increased needs over winter. We also believe the Trust Board will be failing in its duty of care to its patients and staff if it knowingly creates conditions of extreme pressure, and conditions that may force staff to compromise on professional standards of care.

At a time when the hospital's future is hanging in balance the Trust Board is in danger of squandering its greatest assets: the staff, their morale, the ability to deliver good clinical standard of care, and the hospital's reputation with the public, and referring health professionals. So many letters from the public in support of retaining Whipps as our DGH refer to marked the improvements over recent years.

Turnaround is in danger of propelling us backwards - unless the Board is able to clearly and honestly draw the line where financial savings mean compromising our standards of care for patients, their safety, and the health, safety, skill and motivation of staff. We call on all Board members to ensure the capacity within Whipps Cross that the population actually needs and safeguard the staff we need to provide it.

Charlotte Monro, Unison, Staff Side Co-Chair
Jenny Frost RCN Staff Side Secretary