

Children may miss out on treatment at Lake Alice

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Mentally disturbed children could be turned away from Lake Alice Hospital's child unit because of administrative changes following a controversy over electric shock treatment there.

The children likely to be affected are neurotic or have behaviour problems, the psychiatrist formerly in charge of the unit, Dr S. Leeks, of Palmerston North, told the Chronicle last night.

"These kids will be stuck with their pain, unless there is a sympathetic GP in their town who has time to spend with them," Dr Leeks said.

Dr Leeks, embroiled in the controversy surrounding the administering of electro-convulsive therapy to a 13-year-old Niuean boy, is no longer the psychiatrist in charge of the child unit. He has been retained as a child consultant.

However, he said last night considerable changes had been made to

the unit and a third of the patients had now been brought under the care of the hospital's three other general psychiatrists.

Dr Leeks, employed by the Palmerston North Hospital at its Manawaru psychological unit, said the changes meant many children would probably not now be admitted to Lake Alice's child unit.

Nowhere

"Some of these children do not need to be in hospital, but apart from the child unit there has been nowhere for them. Now there will be little or no help for these children," he said.

The change could affect about a sixth of the children previously admitted to the unit.

Dr Leeks said he was also worried that the unit could now have trouble finding suitable nursing staff.

"Staff consistency is really essential," he said. "Children come to rely on seeing the same people, but in a State run hospital the general idea is for staff to move around — and a lot of people do not like having to nurse kids. Few do, because it is demanding."

Staff consistency was also important in group therapy.

Dr Leeks said he had been pleased with the nurses working at the unit during the past two years.

"Whether they will continue there now is hard to say," he said.

Total care

Dr Leeks said he had more than a full time job

with his work at Manawaru which is also to include a total care ward for adolescences which will have 8-10 beds for disturbed children.

The superintendent of Lake Alice Hospital, Dr S.L. Pugmire, last night said the decision for Dr Leeks to no longer be known as the psychiatrist-in-charge of the adolescent unit, was made because of supervision problems.

Dr Leeks spent only a fifth of his time at the hospital. The change was sensible, he said.

"We are totally behind, Dr Leeks in regard to his ECT treatment. He gave the 13-year-old Niuean boy the correct treatment and the boy improved noticeably."

However, because of the allegations, some of which had already been proved false, there had been a considerable cut back in the number of children admitted to the unit, Dr Pugmire said.

False

"Because of the publicity and false allegations, parents are very reluctant to send their children here, and now only 23-25 of the 46 beds in the unit are occupied."

The running of the unit had been changed, Dr Pugmire said, to ensure similar allegations on ECT could not be made again.

"We have improved staffing, and have applied for more psychologists, and Dr Leeks is still the consultant child psychiatrist."

From Christchurch, Dr D.J. Dobson, chairman of the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry, said Dr Leeks was a well regarded member of the profession and one of the few trained child psychiatrists in New Zealand.

Dr M. Durie, director of the Manawaru psychological unit at Palmerston North, said Dr Leeks was a competent and well regarded doctor.

Dr Leeks was the acting director of Manawaru for about four months, and had not been appointed director because he did not apply for the post, Dr Durie said.

Not available

The director of the mental health division of the Health Department, Dr Miriams, could not be contacted last night to say what provisions the Health Department would now make to treat disturbed children.

Already 10% of New Zealand's child population (100,000) is known to be disturbed and the percentage is rising.

Even with the child unit, only one in a hundred are being treated, mainly because New Zealand has insufficient psychiatrists and psychologists.

Dr Leeks is the only child psychiatrist between Wellington and Auckland.

Changes At Lake Alice

Considerable administrative changes have been made to Lake Alice Hospital's child unit since the controversy surrounding the administration of electric shock treatment to a 23-year-old Niuean boy.

According to the psychiatrist formerly in

charge of the unit, Dr S. Leeks, Palmerston North, a third of the patients are now under the care of the hospital's three other general psychiatrists and Dr Leeks is no longer in charge of the unit.

These changes meant many children with neurotic behaviour problems would probably be turned away.

Some of these children did not need to be in hospital but there was nowhere, apart from the child unit, for them.

"These kids will be stuck with their pain, unless there is a sympathetic GP in their town who has time to spend with them," Dr Leeks said.

He was also concerned that the unit could have trouble finding suitable nursing staff now.

Dr Leeks, who is employed by the Palmerston North Hospital at its Manawaroa psychological unit, said he had more than a full time job there.

The decision for Dr Leeks to no longer be known as the psychiatrist in charge of the adolescent unit was made because of supervision problems.

He spent only a fifth of his time at the hospital, the superintendent of Lake Alice, Dr S.L. Pugmire, said. The decision was sensible, he said.

Dr Pugmire said because of the allegations about treatment of the Niuean boy there had been a considerable cutback in the number of children admitted to the unit. Parents were now reluctant to send their children to the unit and only 23-25 of the 46 beds in the unit were occupied.

The running of the unit had been changed to ensure similar allegations on ECT could not be made again. Dr Leeks has been retained as the consultant child psychiatrist.

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