

28 January 2020

Re: Official Information Act request – Air Ambulance Providers

I refer to your Official Information Act request dated 2 December 2019 requesting the following information:

Please find my questions below for your consideration:

a) Firstly, from your understanding, could you please advise if I've missed any notable air ambulance providers from the following list:

- **Air Wanganui**
- **Hawkes Bay Air Ambulance/Skyline Aviation**
- **NZ Flying Doctor Service**
- **Life Flight**
- **Westpac Air Ambulance**
- **Rural GPs Network**
- **Bay of Islands/Northland DHB**
- **National Starship Air Ambulance**
- **NZ Air Ambulance Service**
- **Mainland Air Ambulance**

b) What are the key service details of your service -- ie, flying between what airports, on what frequency, with what aircraft and for how long?

The Auckland DHB Air Ambulance Service provides a patient retrieval service for all of the other DHBs in the country. The core purpose of the service is providing a specialist clinical team and equipment, available 24/7, to retrieve critically ill children from any hospital in the country and delivering them to the only paediatric ICU (PICU) in the country at Starship

Hospital. The cost of this service to all DHBs is offset by charitable donations from the Starship Foundation.

Auckland DHB also provides a national retrieval service for critically ill patients from any hospital in the country that require urgent heart and lung bypass (ECMO or Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation). For this treatment a clinical team with a medical specialist fly from Auckland's Cardiovascular ICU (CVICU) to the regional hospital and start the patient on ECMO treatment. When the patient is clinically stable to travel, they are flown back by the service to CVICU for management of their condition.

Auckland DHB also provides a regional air ambulance retrieval and repatriation service for the Neonatal ICU and adult ICU patients.

Organ Donation NZ uses the Auckland DHB Air Ambulance service to collect organs for transplant, (hearts, lung, kidney, and liver) for the Organ Transplant Service at Auckland DHB.

The service uses fixed wing planes and helicopters. The aircrafts land at all airports and hospital heliports in the country.

Frequency:

The core PICU service use is hugely variable. In November 2019 it was very busy with 18 PICU missions flown; however, the average number of PICU missions flown per month for 2019 was 12.

There were 640 air ambulance flights in 2019 which includes PICU, NICU, Organ Donation, adult ICU and repatriation, providing an average of 53 missions a month.

The flight service has been provided to all DHBs since 2004.

c) Where does the funding come for your service and are there any future concerns in that regard?

The funding for the service comes from the DHB of domicile of the patient who is being transported. The service is also supported by Organ Donation NZ, which is funded directly by the Ministry of Health and there is charitable funding from the Starship Foundation.

We have not addressed the second part of this question because the question is vague and appears to ask Auckland DHB to speculate on future issues and form an opinion which falls outside the scope of the Official Information Act.

d) Essentially, what functions does this service fulfil and how would these functions otherwise be handled if your service did not exist?

As stated above, the core purpose of the Auckland DHB air ambulance service is to retrieve critically ill children and deliver them to PICU so that they can receive high level, specialised paediatric intensive care. This service is not available in any other hospital in the country.

If the air ambulance service did not exist, each patient would have to be transported by a less streamlined, case-by-case transfer that would be associated with increased clinical risk.

For the patients requiring ECMO, Auckland DHB would still need to provide the clinical team to any air ambulance provider who was certified to carry the ECMO equipment, as this is only centre for ECMO treatment in the country. If ECMO air ambulance transport did not exist ECMO would only be available to patients within road travelling distance of Auckland City Hospital.

In the case of organ donation, the organ retrieval team could be flown by another air ambulance but like ECMO, the organ retrieval team would need to come from Auckland DHB as this is the only heart, lung and liver transplant service in the country.

Any air ambulance service which undertook work in any of the above services would need to meet the regulatory requirements of the aircraft size, type and capability and be certified to carry the PICU ECMO and NICU equipment.

e) What is the future likely to hold for the service -- ie, is it facing any other challenges or is it likely to continue on positively and potentially even expand etc?

The Auckland DHB Air Ambulance service is provided by a fixed wing provider and a provider of rotary wing (helicopters) of which 75% of all ADHB air ambulance missions are carried out by fixed wing.

Until recently the helicopter (rotary) contract was also managed by ADHB through the fixed wing agreement.

In April 2019, the rotary contract passed to the management of the National Ambulance Sector Office (NASO) which is a branch of the Ministry of Health (MOH). This contract management is part of the MOH national strategic 10 year plan to modernise the air ambulance rotary fleet across the country which aims to increase the standardisation and integration of air ambulance helicopters which in turn will increase the interoperability of these expensive assets. The helicopters which are under this contract provide both IHTs and primary retrieval work (transporting patients from the scene of the accident.)

Questions A through E have been transferred to the MoH to respond to for all pre hospital service arrangements.

Questions B through E have been answered by Auckland DHB for inter hospital transfers only.

You are entitled to seek a review of the response by the Ombudsman under section 28(3) of the Official Information Act. 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 Auckland DHB website.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ailsa Claire'.

Ailsa Claire, OBE
Chief Executive