

# Plea to keep maternity units

Proposals to close Elderslea and Paraparaumu hospital maternity units were criticised at today's Wellington Area Health Board's meeting.

The board held a special meeting today to approve estimates in order to meet Friday's deadline by which it must deliver a workable budget to Health Minister, Helen Clark.

Ms Clark has warned that if a workable budget providing a comprehensive range of services

is not produced, she will appoint a commissioner to run the board's affairs.

The options being discussed today to meet a \$17 million deficit in the board's budget involved centralising services at Wellington, and cuts to the outlying areas.

The operational plan produced today sees a net reduction in surgical beds of 66 and an increase in day surgery beds by 20.

Kenepuru is to lose 30 surgi-

cal beds and get 15 day surgical beds.

Hutt Hospital will lose nine surgical beds and Wellington has also suffered a loss of 27.

In medical services Hutt Hospital will lose 10 beds.

In obstetrics there is to be total regional reduction of 25 beds.

The plan recommends the 10-bed Elderslea maternity hospital to be replaced by a birthing centre.

Paraparaumu maternity unit

should become a birthing centre closing all 11 in-patient beds.

Upper Hutt Mayor Rex Kirton asked the board to retain Elderslea. Closure was an extreme step which would recoil on the board, he told board members.

Elderslea Action Group spokeswoman Mrs Gail Stevens challenged the board's costings. She said the reported cost of \$150,000 to establish the birthing unit was a gross underestimate.

## Upper Hutt residents lose fight to save Elderslea maternity wing

By LYNNE WALSH  
Health reporter

Upper Hutt residents have lost their long battle to retain the maternity wing at Elderslea Hospital.

The 10-bed unit will be axed as part of the services slashed by the Wellington Area Health board in an attempt to meet its almost \$17 million deficit.

The maternity wing is to be replaced by a birthing unit, described by board general manager Karen Poutasi as a home delivery service.

Women would come to the unit, give birth, and then return home in six to eight hours.

At Paraparaumu Hospital the 11-bed maternity unit is also to be replaced by a four-bed birthing unit.

The financially troubled board today finally approved its estimates after a day and a half of debate.

Health Minister Helen Clark has

given the board until tomorrow to produce a workable budget, or faced being sacked, and replaced by a Government appointed commissioner.

Service cuts throughout the region have identified savings of \$8.9 million but only \$3 million can be obtained this year.

In line with the decision made at the board's September meeting, will use loan finance to bridge the deficit between the two years.

Some \$4 million will be obtained through overdraft facilities, while another \$4.7 million will be raised by a term loan to purchase equipment, which added to the expected \$3 million saving this year, reduces the deficit to \$11.8 million.

The board had agreed to use asset sales to fund redundancies estimated to cost \$1.6 million.

The remaining \$3.5 million of the deficit has been cut by measures not revealed publicly because of "commercial sensitivity."

However, The Post understands the reduction in amount of land tax, and the recent agreement by health unions to accept a 2 percent wage settlement until June 1990 are among the factors involved.

The services cuts see surgical services centralised at Wellington Hospital with cuts to the outlying areas.

Geriatric services are to be leased out to private or voluntary agencies.

Opposition to the board estimates came from retiring board member Trevor Roberts who claimed inadequate figures and "soft budgeting" would mean the board would not be able to meet its budget.

The blunt fact was with the best will in the world the board had not made enough cuts to meet its statutory obligations.

He said he agreed the board was underfunded and under resourced but that was beside the point.

It had to tailor its estimates to meet its allocation.

Mr Roberts said the board was taking a punt on whether soft budgeting would catch up with the board this year or next.

"If it's this year it's egg on our faces. If it's next year it's eggs on the faces of the new board."

Only five of the 14 board members approving today's estimates were re-elected at last week's local body elections.

The new board does not take over until December, but will have to implement the decisions of the old board unless, of course, Ms Clark carries out her threat to sack the board.

Board member Doug Catley said he agreed some costs could be underestimated in the figures but he believed there would be compensatory savings in other figures.

He believed if the board's revenues were professionally managed with some entrepreneurial skills for about another 24 months then the board should see itself in the clear.