

BIRTH DROP SHUTS HOSPITAL

ST HELENS Maternity Hospital is to close.

This was announced today by the Minister of Health (Mr Gair) who described the decision as "one of the most difficult" he had had to make as Minister.

Closure will take place on the commissioning of Wellington Hospital's new obstetrics and gynaecology block about June next year.

The decision comes after more than two years of protracted debate and an agonisingly slow decision-making process by the Wellington Hospital Board.

The board and its committees decided to close the hospital and then postponed any action several times in response to strong public reaction.

The board finally made up its mind after 18 months — the Minister reached his decision after more than six months.

"I know that over the years St Helens has established a deservedly high reputation as a maternity hospital. It has served Wellington well, and the standards that have been set are a tribute to the medical and nursing staff at the hospital," Mr Gair said.

But after long and careful consideration of all the many submissions he had received, he had reluctantly agreed to support the request by the Wellington Hospital Board that St Helens should close.

Mr Gair said the new O and G block which was nearing completion was built to provide specialised obstetrical, gynaecological and neo-natal facilities for the whole of the Wellington Hospital Board district.

It replaced the existing obstetrical unit at the hospital.

Decline

"The hospital board's original plan was to operate St Helens in conjunction with the new block, but there has since been a decline in population growth and the birth rate," he said.

He had been faced with three options:

- To mothball or find some other use for the new

O and G block, and continue with the present obstetric services at Wellington Hospital and St Helens.

- Open the new O and G block and retain St Helens.

- Close St Helens.

"The first option was not on," said Mr Gair.

"The inadequate maternity accommodation at Wellington Hospital must be replaced, and this means a move to the new O and G block."

As regards the second option, Mr Gair said that having two maternity hospitals in the centre of Wellington, each only partly used, would unnecessarily divide

Backup

This would reduce the present level of service at St Helens and add to the problem of a lack of full backup facilities to cover emergencies at that hospital.

"The advantage to both mother and child in centring all maternity services in the new block is that all paediatric, sophisticated resuscitative, blood grouping and bio-chemical services will be readily available," he said.

Mr Gair said before making his decision he visited all three institutions involved, spoke with and corresponded with many people, and questioned in detail some of the city's leading medical figures.

"The weight of advice was strongly for the course adopted, and I believe the only responsible decision I could have made in these circumstances is the decision to close St Helens," Mr Gair said.

Additional notes released with Mr Gair's statement said that 27 of the 63 post-natal beds in the new O and G block would be in single rooms.

Patients would retain a free choice of their doctor, under the same conditions as at present apply at St Helens.

The cost of operating both St Helens and the new block would be \$4,537,000, compared with a cost for the new block alone of \$3,882,300, the notes revealed.



Mr Gair — one of his toughest decisions.