

Mr. Gerard Hayes
Secretary
Health Services Union
Locked Bag 3
Australia Square NSW 1215

By email: secretary@hsu.asn.au

Dear Mr Hayes

I am writing to inform you of recent developments regarding the provision of Anatomical Pathology services at the NSW Health Pathology (NSWHP) Lismore laboratory.

Following a comprehensive assessment by the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) on 5 December 2023, it has been determined by NATA that NSWHP should cease the processing of non-complex anatomical pathology samples at the Lismore laboratory. Notice of this decision was provided to NSWHP by NATA on 19 December 2023 with immediate effect. The primary factor contributing to this decision is the ongoing challenge of onsite supervision and governance as a result of an inability to recruit onsite Anatomical Pathologists, despite our repeated efforts over the past three years. This issue is part of a broader national shortage of Anatomical Pathologists, which is especially acute in regional areas.

In light of the long-standing vacancies in the Pathologist positions, the Anatomical Pathology Department is currently comprised of a small team of Administration Officers (1.0 FTE), Technical Assistants (0.89 FTE), Technical Officers (3.68 FTE), a Senior Technical Officer (1.0 FTE), and a vacant Scientific Officer position.

The service prepared and processed non-complex tissue samples that were either direct transfers or cases requiring only basic cut up. The Lismore Anatomical Pathology Department received formalin fixed samples that were processed and embedded into paraffin blocks, with finely cut slices applied to glass slides, that were then stained ready for microscopic examination by specialist Anatomical Pathologists at other sites, including the NSWHP Tweed Heads laboratory. Other more complex specimens were referred to other NSWHP laboratories for cut up, tissue processing and reporting, including the NSWHP laboratories at John Hunter and Westmead Hospitals. There have been no quality or safety issues reported.

On Wednesday 20 December 2023, NSWHP communicated the outcome of the NATA assessment to the staff within the Anatomical Pathology Department, outlining interim arrangements and discussing options for individual staff members. Our commitment to supporting our team includes opportunities for rotation within other departments at the Lismore laboratory, training and development as needed, and potential relocation to other Anatomical Pathology Departments across our network of laboratories.

It is important to note that the NATA concerns primarily revolved around the inability to provide suitable supervision and governance of the Anatomical Pathology Department and do not reflect any shortcomings in the high standard of technical work performed by the Department. To further support our staff during this transition, we have engaged our employee assistance provider to offer additional assistance.

As a proactive measure, we have implemented a contingency plan to ensure there is no impact to service quality, turn-around-times or patient care. This involves the referral of work across our network of Anatomical Pathology laboratories and remote reporting. While this practice is not unfamiliar to NSWHP and our Anatomical Pathology teams, it is a temporary solution while we establish a longer-term service model.

NSWHP remains committed to retaining and enhancing Anatomical Pathology services regionally, including within the Northern NSW Local Health District, to meet evolving regional demands. We are exploring longer-term options for the provision of high-quality, sustainable Anatomical Pathology services across the region. We will also continue to attempt to recruit to our vacant Anatomical Pathologist positions.

NSWHP will provide further updates on Anatomical Pathology services in Northern NSW, keeping our staff and stakeholders, including the Health Services Union (HSU) and the Australian Salaried Medical Officers Federation (ASMOF), informed as developments unfold.

We appreciate your attention, understanding, and collaboration as we navigate through this change. Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Dr Deanna Paulin

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Director, People and Culture
NSW Health Pathology
