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Patients' families asked to drive ambulances

Lives are at risk because of the use of single-staffed ambulances, with incidents of patients' families being asked to drive the vehicle to hospital, MPs say.

Health Ministry officials were questioned by Parliament's health select committee yesterday about the fact that one in five emergency callouts - about 50,000 each year - were attended by sole ambulance officers.

The inquiry follows reports of family members having to drive ambulances, and ambulance officers being asked to take their own vehicles to callouts.

Committee chairwoman and Green MP Sue Kedgley said no other frontline health workers were completely unregulated. "They are being forced to break their own safety standards because of the lack of resources.

"Double-crewing in emergencies and ambulance standards must be given statutory force."

Deputy director-general of health Anthony Hill told the committee that the ministry was committed to double-crewing "in all appropriate circumstances", which was reflected in funding increases of 39 per cent over the past four years.

However, Maori Party co-leader Tariana Turia said she was concerned by the phrasing in the contract that said providers must deliver the required standard of double-crewing in all categories "to the best of their endeavour".

"I'm concerned that when it's a life and death situation, 'best endeavour' may not be good enough."

When asked by Ms Kedgley whether a shortage of ambulance officers was to blame for single-crewing, Mr Hill said he was not aware of any "specific" shortage.

Workforce issues and "flexible" options for crewing ambulances were under consideration.

Ambulance Association spokesman John Stretton, a Wanganui paramedic, said there was no doubt single-crewing put lives at risk.

An analysis prepared for the Health Ministry - which had not been publicly released - identified a shortfall of about 800 ambulance officers nationwide.

The association has tabled nearly 100 cases in March and April of single-crewed ambulances sent to emergencies in Horowhenua, including cardiac pain, back injury, asthma and near drowning. In one case, a single-crewed ambulance sent to a patient in cardiac arrest in Horowhenua had to wait more than 45 minutes for help to arrive from Palmerston North. The patient died.

Horowhenua and Waikato were the worst affected, with up to 69 per cent of calls left to sole ambulance officers, Mr Stretton said. "If the ministry thinks single crewing is acceptable - against the advice of their own advisory group - I would like to see them try it."

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