Dear Chair

Letter of Expectations for district health boards and subsidiary entities for 2019/20

This letter sets out the Government’s expectations for district health boards (DHBs) and their subsidiary entities for 2019/20.

In early September, the Prime Minister announced a long-term plan to build a modern and fairer New Zealand; one that New Zealanders can be proud of. As part of the plan, our Government commits to improving the wellbeing of all New Zealanders and their families, and ensuring that the economy is growing and working for all.

Our health system has an important role in supporting the Government’s goals. To do this we need to be sure that our public health system is: strong and equitable, performing well, and focused on the right things to make all New Zealanders’ lives better.

Achieving equity within the New Zealand health system underpins all of my priorities. Māori as a population group experience the poorest health outcomes. As you consider equity within your district, there needs to be an explicit focus on achieving equity for Māori across their life course. Māori-Crown relations is a priority for this Government and I expect your DHB to meet your Treaty of Waitangi obligations as specified in the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000. I am expecting you to report on progress with how you are meeting these obligations as part of your Annual Plan reporting.

Unmet need also represents a significant barrier to achieving equity in health outcomes for all populations groups across New Zealand. I expect your Annual Plan to contain actions that will enable progress towards achieving equity and to address the key areas of unmet need especially for Pacific peoples and other population groups in your regions with poorer health outcomes.

Our approach

DHB Chairs are directly accountable for their DHB’s performance. We expect Boards to be highly engaged and to hold Chief Executives and management to account for improved performance within their DHB, in relation to both equity of access to health services and equity of health outcomes. In addition, I will also be working towards ensuring that Māori membership of DHB Boards is proportional to the Māori population within your district.

Fiscal responsibility

Strong fiscal management is essential to enable delivery of better services and outcomes for New Zealanders. I expect DHBs to live within their means and maintain expenditure growth in line with or lower than funding increases.

My expectation is that DHBs have in place clear processes to ensure appropriate skill mix and FTE growth that supports changes in models of care and use the full range of the available workforce and settings. This is essential for ensuring financial and clinical sustainability of our health system.

A better collective understanding of the demand for services, drivers of deficits and financial risks remains a very significant priority and I expect you to work closely and proactively with the Ministry of Health on these matters. I will continue to meet and speak with you frequently during the year to discuss performance, and I will be looking particularly closely at your ability to deliver in the Government’s priority areas, to keep within budget and to manage your cash position.
Strong and equitable public health and disability system

Building infrastructure
My expectation is for timely delivery of Ministers’ prioritised business cases. I remind you that capital projects over $10 million are subject to joint Ministers (Minister of Health and Minister of Finance) approval. Business cases will be assessed to ensure that they are in line with the Health Capital Envelope priorities. I also expect you to ensure that your agency is aware of the expectation that upcoming construction projects will be used to develop skills and training and that the construction guidelines will be applied for all procurement of new construction from this point onwards. I will be writing to you separately about this with further detail.

National Asset Management Plan
I expect you to support the National Asset Management Plan programme of work. I encourage you to actively interact with the project as, long term, the National Asset Management Plan will formulate the capital investment pipeline, and ensure DHBs’ future infrastructure needs are met.

Devolution
I am considering devolution of certain services and expect to be making decisions in the New Year. DHBs will be consulted during the process to ensure the financial and service implications are well understood. Once any decisions have been made, I will expect you to work with the Ministry of Health to ensure a seamless transition of responsibilities.

Workforce
I expect DHBs to develop bargaining strategies that are consistent with the Government Expectations on Employment Relations in the State Sector, and to act collaboratively to ensure that any potential flow-on implications across workforces and/or across DHBs are understood and addressed in the bargaining strategies. A Government priority is raising the wages of the least well-paid workforces, which will require a different approach to the traditional one based on across-the-board percentage increases. I also expect DHBs to implement Care Capacity Demand Management in accordance with the process and timetable set out in the 2018-2020 MECA. I note that the State Services Commissioner has included wording that reflects the commitments in the New Zealand Nurses Organisation Accord in the performance expectations of the Director-General of Health and I ask you to consider including similar wording in the performance expectations of your Chief Executive.

DHBs have an essential role in training our future workforce and I expect you to support training opportunities for the range of workforce groups. As part of this, you should work closely with training bodies such as tertiary education institutes and professional colleges and bodies to ensure that we have a well trained workforce and to support research. I continue to expect DHBs will adhere to the Medical Council’s requirement for community-based attachments for PGY1 and PGY2 doctors.

Bowel Screening
The National Bowel Screening programme remains a priority for this Government, and I expect you to develop a sustainable endoscopy workforce, be it medical or nursing, including the strategic support of training positions for both nursing and medical trainees in order to meet growing demand in this area. It is crucial that symptomatic patients are not negatively impacted by screening demand and the Ministry of Health will work closely with you on workforce issues to support this.

Planned Care
I am enabling DHBs to take a refreshed approach to the delivery of elective services under a broader “Planned Care” programme. Timely access to Planned Care remains a priority. The refreshed approach to Planned Care will provide you with greater flexibility in where and how you deliver services and will enable more care to be delivered within the funding envelope. I urge you to take advantage of the opportunity that will be made available, and support your teams to develop well considered delivery plans that align with your population's needs, support timely care, and make the best use of your workforce and resources.
Disability
Disabled people experience significant health inequalities and they should be able to access the same range of health services as the rest of the general population. My expectation is that DHBs are working towards or are implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I expect DHBs to implement policies for collecting information, within their populations, about people with disabilities. In addition, please ensure your contracts with providers reflect their requirements to either ensure accessibility or put in place concrete plans to transition to a more accessible service.

System Level Measures
As part of your focus on improving quality, I expect you to continue to co-design and deliver initiatives to achieve progress on System Level Measures with primary health organisations (PHOs) and other key stakeholders.

Rural health
The Government expects DHBs with rural communities to consider their health needs and the factors affecting health outcomes for rural populations when making decisions regarding health services.

Mental health and addiction care
Mental health and addiction remains a priority area for this Government and I expect your DHB to prioritise strengthening and improving mental health and addiction service areas in your 2019/20 Annual Plan. The Mental Health and Addiction Inquiry report is under consideration by the Government and it is my expectation that DHBs are ready to move on implementing the Government’s response to its recommendations.

Over the last year a number of deaths across the country have been attributed to use of synthetic cannabinoids. I expect DHBs to consider the role of both public health and specialist treatment services in providing coordinated local responses to emerging drug threats such as synthetic cannabinoids.

Child wellbeing
Child wellbeing is a priority for our Government. I expect your annual plans to reflect how you are actively working to improve the health and wellbeing of infants, children, young people and their whānau with a particular focus on improving equity of outcomes.

In supporting the Government’s vision of making New Zealand the best place in the world to be as a child I expect DHBs to have a specific focus on:

- supporting the development of the Child Wellbeing Strategy, particularly the First 1000 days of a child’s life and child and youth mental wellbeing
- contributing to the review of the Well Child Tamariki Ora programme
- supporting the reduction of family violence and sexual violence through addressing abuse as a fundamental health care responsibility.

Maternity care and midwifery
High quality maternity care is recognised as a fundamental part of child wellbeing. I am listening to the issues the community is raising with me, and I take the concerns about the level of capacity in the midwifery workforce seriously. It is my expectation that DHBs implement a plan to support improved recruitment and retention of midwives, including midwives in the community and midwives employed in all maternity facilities.
Smokefree 2025
I also expect you to advance progress towards the Smokefree 2025 goal, particularly community-based wrap-around support for people who want to stop smoking, with a focus on Māori, Pacific, pregnant women and people on a low income. I also want to see DHBs collaborating across their region to support smoking cessation including, where appropriate, amongst programme providers, with a view to sharing and strengthening knowledge and delivery of effective interventions.

Primary health care
Improved access to primary health care brings significant benefits for all New Zealanders as well as our health system. Removing barriers to primary health care services and improving equity are key priorities for this Government. I also want to see closer integration of primary health care with secondary and community care. I intend to continue to invest in primary health care and expect all DHBs to support this important priority.

Non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention and management
As our major killers, NCDs, particular cancers, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes need to be a major focus for prevention and treatment for your DHB. I want you to continue a particular focus on type 2 diabetes prevention and management, including an emphasis on ensuring access to effective self-management education and support. I want to see an increased focus on prevention, resilience, recovery and wellbeing for all ages, as part of a healthy ageing approach. You should also use PHO and practice-level data to inform quality improvement.

Public health and the environment

Environmental sustainability
I expect you to continue to contribute to the Government’s priority outcome of environmental sustainability and undertake further work that leads to specific actions, including reducing carbon emissions, to address the impacts of climate change on health. This will need to incorporate both mitigation and adaption strategies, underpinned by cost-benefit analysis of co-benefits and financial savings and I expect you to work collectively with the Ministry of Health on this important area.

Healthy eating and healthy weight
As part of your sector leadership role, I strongly encourage you to support healthy eating and healthy weight through continuing to strengthen your DHB’s Healthy Food and Drink Policy. This includes increasing the number of food options categorised as ‘green’ in the National Policy and moving towards only selling water and milk as cold drink options. I actively encourage you to support other public and private organisations to do the same. There is a strong rationale for DHBs providing such leadership in their communities to both set an example and to ‘normalise’ healthy food and drink options. In particular I would like you to work directly with schools to support them to adopt water-only and healthy food policies.

Drinking water
You will be aware that our Government is undertaking system-wide reform of the regulatory arrangements for drinking water and I am confident that you will support any developments that may result. I expect you to work through your Public Health Unit across agency and legislative boundaries to carry out your key role in drinking water safety with a focus on the health of your population.

Integration
Improving equity and wellbeing and delivering on several other expectations I am setting in this letter will not be possible without strong cross-sectoral collaboration. I expect DHBs to demonstrate leadership in the collaboration between and integration of health and social services, especially housing.
Planning processes

Your DHB's 2019/20 Annual Plan is to reflect my expectations and I also ask you to demonstrate a renewed focus on your strategic direction, by refreshing your Statement of Intent in 2019/20.

I believe providing you with my expectations in December will support your planning processes, however I also acknowledge that some important decisions will be made in the coming weeks, including detail related to implementation of the Mental Health and Addictions Inquiry recommendations. To ensure my expectations are clear, it is my intention to provide an update to this letter in the New Year.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, the Board and your staff for your dedication and efforts to provide high quality and equitable outcomes for your population.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Hon Dr David Clark
Minister of Health