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Cancer patients sent away for treatment

A 10 per cent increase in radiotherapy patients being treated at Christchurch Hospital means Marlborough and South Canterbury cancer sufferers are being sent elsewhere.

Marlborough cancer patients will be treated by Wellington cancer services from this month and South Canterbury patients referred to Dunedin.

Canterbury radiotherapy services are struggling to cope with a 10 per cent rise in patient numbers in the last quarter of 2009 compared with the same period in 2008.

The "temporary solution" of sending patients elsewhere was to avoid long waiting times, Canterbury District Health Board radiation oncology clinical director Dr Iain Ward said.

"We know the incidence of cancer is increasing gradually and the population is growing so we expect a steady gradual increase, but I must say 10 per cent is rather larger than normal," he said.

Christchurch Hospital had tried to cope by providing evening radiotherapy clinics, but recruiting difficulties and stress on staff meant they would stop at the end of the month.

Ward said the South Island's first private radiotherapy clinic would start treating patients at St George's Hospital next month which would ease the strain on public services.

A new linear accelerator had also been installed at Christchurch Hospital which would start treating patients in a few months.

The health board said the new machine would be 12 to 20 per cent more efficient than its predecessor, translating to about 70 more courses of treatment each year.

Ward said the board would reassess the situation in three months, but expected to be able to take Marlborough and South Canterbury referrals again by that time.

The national target is for patients to receive radiotherapy within six weeks of their first specialist assessment.

The Nelson-Marlborough district was ranked 19th in the country for meeting the target in the latest Ministry of Health report on board performance. Ninety-two per cent of its patients were treated within the mandatory timeframe compared with 98 per cent in Canterbury and 100 per cent in South Canterbury.
