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Health Ombudsman releases report into the safety and quality of maternity services provided by the Biloela Hospital maternity service

Queensland's Health Ombudsman has today released a report into the safety and quality of maternity services provided at five facilities within the Central Queensland Hospital and Health Service (CQHHS) catchment, including the Biloela Hospital maternity service, which has a Level 3 24-hour maternity service and is the largest maternity facility in the Banana Shire of Central Queensland.

CQHHS conducted an independent review between August 2017 and January 2018 and made 9 recommendations in relation to improving the clinical governance framework and incident management processes. The Office of the Health Ombudsman (the office) conducted a systemic investigation that examined the issues identified through this review and from individual complaints about the Biloela maternity service between 2015 and 2018.

The investigation found that Biloela Hospital had already identified significant improvements to clinical governance and risk assessing and escalation, despite facing skilled workforce recruitment and resourcing challenges. Health Ombudsman Andrew Brown says the investigation revealed that the Biloela maternity service is performing at a safe level and demonstrates commitment to improving and refining its services.

The investigation's main findings focused on the safety and quality governance structure of the Biloela maternity service, staffing stability and culture, and the introduction of shared care and midwifery group practice. As a result, Mr Brown said he had made one recommendation to ensure that the streamlining of the safety and quality governance committee structure is embedded as part of the clinical governance framework, which is aimed at limiting the gaps in the governance chain where issues have the potential to fall through.

"The investigation has made it clear that there needs to be a rationalisation of the number of governance committees, given there have been low numbers of adverse incidents and safety matters," said Mr Brown. "I believe that the maternity service would benefit from joint safety and quality meetings across the Banana Shire."

The investigation found that the maternity service had experienced challenges in recruiting skilled midwifery and medical staff, which had received some relief in 2018 with the permanent appointment of a nurse unit manager. As a whole, the culture of the maternity service is supportive and willing to ensure the provision of high quality services, which is evident in a high compliance rate for mandatory and ad hoc training despite the logistical challenges of supporting staff to undertake training.

Biloela Hospital is exploring additional models of maternity care due to the declining birth rate: shared care with local general practitioners and a midwifery group practice. The introduction of these models of care are currently underway and will offer Banana Shire women more choice and the option of birthing as close to home as possible, which Mr Brown says is an appropriate and consumer-focused approach.

“The maternity service at Biloela Hospital is facing the same challenges as most rural health services in Queensland: skilled clinical workforce recruitment,” said Mr Brown. “Despite these challenges, it is clear that Biloela Hospital is committed to improving its service and that its maternity service is safe. It can be further supported by a clearer approach to clinical governance.”

Mr Brown added that a clearer governance chain may give Biloela Hospital a voice which puts the challenges of a rural maternity service at the forefront of safety and quality planning.

The full investigation report is available to download from the OHO website at www.oho.qld.gov.au.

Media enquiries: media@oho.qld.gov.au

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