

No butts edict raises harm risk for patients

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PLANS to force hundreds of mentally ill people in hospital to quit smoking because of the enforcement of strict anti-smoking rules in hospitals would increase their suffering and push some to the brink of suicide, advocates fear.

Mental health hospitals are moving to ban smoking outdoors as well as indoors even though smoking rates among the mentally ill are much higher than in the wider community. About 90 per cent of people with schizophrenia smoke.

The outdoor ban has been opposed by several organisations, including the Mental Health Coordinating Council. In a submission to a NSW Health taskforce, they warn nicotine withdrawal imposed extra stress on very sick patients.

"It targets a particularly vulnerable section of the community with bans that the Government will not impose on the larger community," the submission said. "It imposes a disproportionate level of suffering on those who are already suffering enough."

Activists also warn mentally ill people who smoke might be less likely to volunteer for treatment if they can't smoke.

A spokeswoman for NSW Health said the decision to implement the new policy lay with each area health service, which would determine how to do it in consultation with advisory bodies, clinicians, and specialists.

Meanwhile, the lock-in time for forensic mental health patients at Long Bay - not all of whom are guilty of crimes - has

been moved forward from 9pm to 3.30pm, forcing patients to sit alone in their cells for about 18 hours a day.

The decision comes despite a review of the NSW forensic mental health law that found it was so unclear and inconsistent that agencies often failed to comply and patients were adversely and sometimes wrongly treated.

Both nurses and prisoner support group Justice Action are concerned that the extended lockdown will exacerbate the patients' mental health symptoms and reduce the number of contact hours with doctors and nurses.

There have been two suicide attempts since the new hours began on April 2.

A spokesman for Justice Action, Brett Collins, said the lockdown was in preparation for a move to the new Long Bay hospital. He said the forensic hospital had lost 28 prison officer positions as part of the new regime.

"The patients will self-harm, and become sicker as a consequence," Mr Collins said. "They will be drugged to tolerate the conditions although they have said they will refuse medication as a protest."

One prisoner told the *Herald* by telephone that he had begun taking Valium to cope with the stress of being locked in his cell.

A Corrective Services spokeswoman said the new hours at Long Bay were in line with those at Silverwater. Patients at both prisons have access to health care and are allowed out of their cells to smoke.

"There's been no increase at all in the rate of self-harm or violence," she said.