

DHBs muzzled says Green Party

by Owen Hembray

Green Party accusations that district health boards are dysfunctional and undemocratic cast a shadow over the election of new boards around the country last weekend.

Sue Kedgley, Green Party health spokesperson, says the Government promised local democracy but most DHB members are "muzzled", unable to speak out on issues or act as advocates for their electorates.

She says one of her concerns is the control Health Minister Annette King exercises over DHBs.

"I'm concerned the Minister of Health personally has the power to appoint every chair. She has undue influence. She has the ability to give any direction she wishes to a district health board."

Kedgley says that by law DHBs are accountable to the Ministry of Health and not to the people who elect them, and until they are given autonomous pow-



Sue Kedgley

ers and financial independence they cannot effect changes.

"What a lot of them are saying is: 'Well actually all we really do is act as a rubber stamp. All of our directions come from the Minister'."

Kedgley says the Government is using the appearance of autonomy to deflect criticism regarding waiting lists and lack of hospital staff.

"The main thing they (DHBs) seem to end up doing is coping the flak and taking the blame so that the Minister can say: 'You'll have to blame the DHB'."

"They're used by the Minister to abdicate responsibility."

The statement from the Green Party is supporting former Canterbury District Health Board member Professor Philip Bagshaw.

Bagshaw says almost all poli-

cies were handed down to the DHB for rubber-stamping.

"There's supposed to be a district annual plan that's produced locally. However that is written according to a template that's handed down. If you look at all our funding agreements, they're so tight that we have virtually no room for manoeuvre."

The purpose of elected members is to facilitate local input into policy but in reality, Bagshaw says, they make no difference at all.

"If we are good girls and boys we get to put the word Canterbury in there."

Bagshaw, a surgeon at Christchurch hospital for 24 years, says the Canterbury DHB had a policy of preventing members from talking to the media. Something for which he previously found himself in trouble.

"As an elected person I thought I had not only a right but a responsibility to speak to the public on what I thought were issues, but apparently not. They believed my responsibility was to the board and the



Annette King

Minister, but not to the local people."

He put forward a proposal to the DHB to allow board members to speak publicly but was heavily defeated.

Bagshaw says he is also concerned about a "conflict of interest clause" used to prevent people sitting on committees where they have a vested interest.

As an experienced surgeon he could not sit on the hospital advisory committee, which he felt was a loss of his expertise. He was further concerned about inconsistent implementation of the clause.

"This clause seems to be used for anybody who might not be, shall we say, toeing the party line."

Bagshaw decided not to stand again in the elections last week because he felt "it would be a

complete waste of time".

Health Minister Annette King says Professor Bagshaw's perspective is that of just one person, which proves the case neither one way nor the other.

"Over the past three years there have only been five resignations of elected members from DHBs, so that scarcely shows a high degree of dysfunctionality."

"What it does show perhaps is no system suits everyone, and maybe there are a few people who have not been able to achieve what they hoped to achieve."

King says 70% of the 500 people who stood for DHB election last week were standing for re-election.

Candidates also included members of the Green Party.

"If the Greens believe boards are so dysfunctional, why are they standing?"

The Minister says there are no plans to reform the current DHB structure.

Kedgley says the Green Party will continue to raise the issue at every opportunity.

STV system has some voters ticking all the wrong boxes

by Peter James

Some voters struggled with the new single transferable vote (STV) system used for the district health board elections.

With STV, voters were required to rank their preferred candidates and number them one to seven, rather than simply ticking the boxes.

Auckland electoral officer Dale Ofsoske says he received calls from worried voters who ticked the boxes rather than numbering them.

Te Waha Nui asked a sample of Aucklanders how they got on with STV. Ellerslie



Ross Davies

designer Ross Davies (26) says he heard from several people who found the system confusing.

Although he says he had no problems filling out the form, he thinks it would better to go back to the old FPP (first past the post) system for the election of the district health board.

"I think there's nothing simpler than a few ticks really, rather than numbering and ranking," he says.

Marie Hayes (66), who is retired, says she thought the STV system was okay, although she first ticked the boxes rather than numbering them.

"I left the ticks and then I put my numbers beside the ticks," she says, "so whether I invalidated it, I don't know."

Mr Ofsoske says that if people's accidental ticks were crossed out and replaced with numbers, their votes would have been counted.

Hayes says she voted for the

STV system to be used for the national elections.

"And everyone said it was too complicated," she says.

AUT student Katherine Northover (21) says she had problems choosing who to vote for under the STV system.

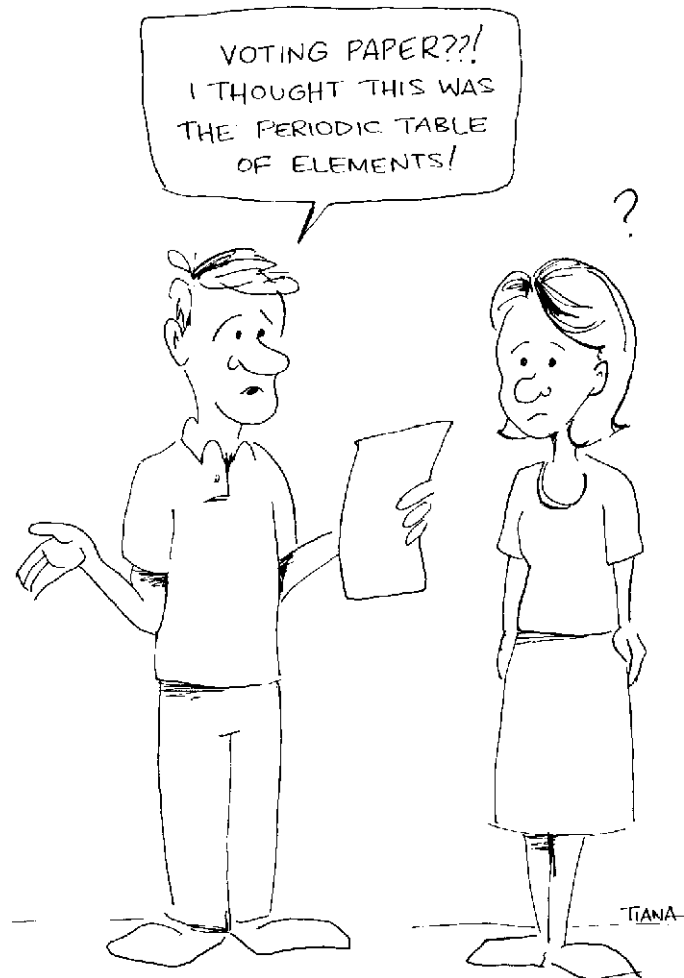
"For the STV bit you're supposed to pick seven people, and it's really hard to find that many people that have something to say that you actually like," she says.

Like Northover, barista Mike Gillard (24) says selecting candidates was difficult.

He says that trying to rank candidates with such a small amount of information was "a bit futile".

Both Northover and Gillard think STV should be used again.

"The concept of voting (STV) is a good one", says Gillard, "but there has to be a change somewhere else to enable people to actually vote well."



Microchips replacing barcodes in Manukau's library books

by Grace Edwards

Manukau library users will be among the first New Zealanders to use books with microchips rather than barcodes.

Botany Library opened to the public on Wednesday October 5 and is the first public library in New Zealand to use radio frequency identification (RFID) tags.

The 5cm square microchip and antenna are attached to every book - replacing the barcode.

Manukau libraries technologies manager Adele Nairn says this technology will help the library gain efficiency, increase security and better manage the collection.

The tags emit a radio frequency signal that can be picked up from a short distance by a hand-held wand.

This replaces staff having to scan books manually with a barcode reader.

"For stock takes we used to have to close libraries for two days so books could be counted," says Ms Nairn.

"We are now going to be able to do stock takes in probably less than a stimulus of processing time saved by RFID systems range from 30 to 75%."

Ms Nairn says RFID will reduce the time staff spend on boring, repetitive tasks, so they can be out helping library users rather than out the back scanning barcodes.

"The last thing we want anyone to think is that we're doing this to cut down on staff. That is absolutely not what we want to do," says Ms Nairn.

"It should make things nicer for librarians, so they can actually be librarians rather than just passing books between trolleys," she says.

When a library user leaves with a book that has not been checked out correctly

and sets off a security gate alarm, librarians will be able to identify exactly which book set off the alarm.

Overseas there have been fears that RFID microchips could be used to store information about users.

The RFID tags used at Botany Library are passive and will be programmed with only the barcode number.

Ms Nairn says Botany Library has fitted tags to 35,000 books and expects to reach 50,000 over the next few years.

At about \$1.30 a tag, according to Checkpoint Metro's Rex Worthington, RFID is more expensive than barcodes, which is the main reason why other public libraries have not yet adopted this technology.

"It is a little more expensive. We were aware of that going in. That's why we are only doing one branch," says Ms Nairn.

Four academic libraries at Auckland

University are the only other libraries to use RFID technology.

The high demand collections in the faculties of arts, education, economics and business, and science have RFID tagged 12,000 books.

Mr Worthington says RFID has been used in many libraries in the United States since 1999 and is becoming more popular in Asia.

He expects the technology will eventually spread into other industries in New Zealand.

"The first place we will probably see it, other than in libraries, is in the supply chain where labels can be applied to pallets of goods or big boxes of goods," says Mr Worthington.

"Big chains or the grocery lines will probably be the first to pick this up because they've got the clout to run that kind of system."