

**Mr Paul Menzies,  
Chair,  
Southland District Health Board**

**3 February 2010**

**Open letter from Senior Practitioners regarding inadequate consultation on the proposed merger of Southland and Otago DHBs.**

We write to express our concern that the consultation process undertaken by the Southland District Health Board ("SDHB") is materially flawed and cannot form the basis of a considered decision by the SDHB.

The Board must be satisfied that it has sufficient and accurate information to make an informed decision on the issues before it. The Board must conduct a meaningful consultation process in the Southland region, so as to ensure full discussion, particularly in relation to the potential impact of a merger on representation rights for Southland.

We strongly urge the board to conduct further meaningful consultation before determining its views on the proposed merger.

We are particularly concerned at DHB Management's recent public statements that the limited public response to consultation confirms support for the merger. In our opinion, the limited response could equally reflect the inadequacies of the consultation process.

The consultation document was published on 2 November 2009 with public meetings then scheduled and held beginning 4 November. These public meetings were very poorly attended. The deadline for submissions was 11 December 2009, which is the shortest possible consultation period recommended by the Ministry of Health.

The proposed merger involves a large number of complex and significant issues, and deserves thorough consideration. A key issue for Southland residents is the potential disenfranchisement in relation to decision making. This key issue was not highlighted or analysed in any meaningful way in the discussion document. The submissions received focussed heavily on representation concerns, and provided suggestions as to how representation could be maintained. In its subsequent analysis, DHB management classified many submissions as "supportive" even though those submissions were highly conditional, in particular in relation to maintaining a representative voice.

Presumably the merger will necessitate significant amendment to the strategic plan for the SDHB. This issue was not raised at all in the discussion document, yet relates to the fundamental principles guiding the delivery of health services in Southland. Surely detailed consultation should be undertaken on such significant changes?

This letter was unanimously approved by 24 senior practitioners that were present at a meeting held today. The senior doctors in support of this letter are united in our view that we and the public have not been provided sufficient detail and opportunity so as to allow meaningful consultation to occur.

Once completed, the merger is irreversible. In our opinion, we as senior doctors, and the members of the Board owe a duty to the Southland region to ensure that the merger decision, which constitutes one of the most significant ever changes to the Southland health system and has far reaching consequences for other regions, is fully considered and determined to be in the best interests of Southland.

Yours faithfully