

GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERY

Scope Of Surgery and Expertise in New Zealand

The New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons (NZAPS) considers Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons (PRS) are integral to providing care for patients wishing to undergo gender reassignment surgery. While there is much attention on surgery to alter genitalia (both male to female and female to male), the physical changes required to make a transition from one gender to another also may include procedures/operations in other areas eg:

1. Face
2. Breast-related (either breast removal or formation)
3. Ancillary treatments eg laser hair removal

Some of our PRS already perform these breast related operations. This service is currently available in the public health service in some parts of New Zealand. The skills to feminize a male face or vice versa already exist in New Zealand. PRS with an interest in cranio-facial surgery are able to perform this surgery but it is time consuming and expensive.

While there is the expertise to provide these aspects of gender reassignment surgery in Plastic Surgery Units in New Zealand, there is no specific funding support from the Ministry of Health, and therefore patients compete for access to such surgery with all other patients referred.

Currently, there are no PRS in New Zealand who are able to provide surgery to alter genitalia (or be part of a team doing this work).

NZAPS supports an appropriately funded public service in New Zealand, undertaking gender reassignment surgery to alter genitalia. Given the expertise required, this should be offered in a single location. Other surgical interventions for facial and breast related changes should be able to be provided in District Health Boards where there is appropriate expertise. This may require additional funding to allow increased surgical capacity

Service Provision for New Zealanders

NZAPS proposed to the Ministry of Health that a training Fellowship be funded as part of a longer-term plan to meet the needs of patients seeking surgery to alter genitalia. However, the Association is disappointed that the Ministry has not been in a position to fund this at present - New Zealand has been without a surgeon to undertake this surgery since the retirement of Mr Peter Walker in October 2014. One female to male operation and three male to female operations are publically funded every two years through the [Special high cost treatment pool](#) and the operations can be performed overseas. This quota was set in 2003. However, no operations have been carried out since 2013, when three were done overseas.

The Ministry's priority at present is to help District Health Board specialists to identify surgeons overseas to whom they can refer. There will also be consideration given to the

option of bringing a surgeon to New Zealand on an intermittent basis to perform the small number of publicly funded operations to alter genitalia.

The Association does not support an overseas plastic surgeon coming to New Zealand to perform the small number of publicly-funded operations here. Our reasons include:

- The need to manage complications and aftercare for these patients. NZAPS members' experience is that these can occur over a longer duration than a visit and would require New Zealand resident surgeons to be involved in resolution and ongoing management
- Difficulties associated with registration and credentialing for a surgeon working in this way in New Zealand
- Current demand exceeds the small number of operations currently funded. Many patients self fund their treatment overseas, or do not present for treatment given there is limited availability (see below).

Training for Surgery to Alter Genitalia

Gender reassignment surgery is highly complex and training takes many years. Plastic and Reconstructive surgeons train for an additional seven years after obtaining a medical degree and several years post fellowship. Specific training to undertake surgery to alter genitalia can add an additional year or more.

The Association is aware of one New Zealand PRS currently completing a gender reassignment surgery fellowship overseas who is interested in pursuing this surgery here. The surgeon is self-funding their Fellowship and it is hoped they will return to New Zealand in one to two years to be involved in this field.

Waiting List and Overseas Surgery

There are currently 70 people on the waiting list for male to female surgery, and 16 female to male. It is difficult to quantify the unmet need for gender reassignment surgery in New Zealand. If the surgery and ongoing support were offered and funded here using well established techniques, there is likely to be an increase in referrals. This would provide a bigger case load for a New Zealand based surgeon, who would also perform other aspects of plastic and reconstructive surgery as part of their role in a district health board.

There is concern that the lack of surgeons with the expertise to provide surgery to alter genitalia in New Zealand is leading to an increase in the number of New Zealanders self funding their surgery overseas, either through specialist medical tourism companies or as individuals. Other related surgery may also be undertaken overseas eg breast and face. The potential risks to patients undergoing surgery under these circumstances include:

- a short, initial consultation period, with surgery often booked for the day after the consultation in contravention of international agreed standards for providing transgender surgery
- surgery outside a multidisciplinary team environment
- medical staff with uncertain training or regulation
- lack of follow-up (short, medium and long term), with patients often travelling back to New Zealand soon after surgery
- blood clots as a result of long haul travel too soon before and after surgery
- use of unregulated implants
- post-surgery multi-resistant organism infection

- lack of medical, legal or regulatory solutions for patients who experience complications.

More information on gender transition and gender reassignment surgery is available on the Ministry of Health website:

<http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/hospitals-and-specialist-care/high-cost-treatment-pool/gender-reassignment-surgery>