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State housing rents 'bad for health'

By BRIAN GAYNOR

High market rents for state houses are a false economy, as they increase Government health bills, say public health leaders.

Dr Bob McKegg, outgoing president of Public Health Association, said yesterday that high rents contributed to over crowding — ideal conditions for the spread of many infectious diseases which were expensive to treat.

He believed state rents should be cut to a maximum of 30 per cent of a tenant's income (Labour's policy is 25 per cent).

"During the years when rents were kept to that level (30 per cent), New Zealand was doing well at controlling infectious diseases. It's not now.

"We are seeing the rise of these things that we haven't seen for years."

His views were echoed by a national executive member of the association, Lewis Williams, a Massey University doctoral student who coordinated state housing research in Glen hines, Auckland, by a group of state tenants.

Their survey found that about half the 42 households attributed asthma, flu and other respiratory illnesses to the coldness or dampness of their homes.

Sixty-two per cent believed their homes were not insulated and 84 per cent considered the fencing inadequate to protect children from vehicle injuries.

The survey report linked overcrowding to higher rates of illnesses such as tuberculosis and meningococcal disease — the latter an illness labelled a public health emergency by infectious diseases paediatrician Professor Diana Lennon.

A public health specialist at Auckland Healthcare, Dr Chris Bullen, said the Glen Innes-Pt England area was among the three or four worst in Auckland for meningococcal disease. Mangere topped the list and Otara was second.

Labour housing spokesman Graham Kelly, citing hospital admissions for diseases linked to poor housing, said we had become a less healthy country under National-led Governments.

But the Minister of Social Services, Roger Sowry, who attacked the survey's Labour links, said through a spokeswoman that the Government remained committed to its market rents policy.

In its five years, Housing New Zealand had spent $1 billion on maintenance and upgrading state houses.

"Our policy also means selling houses that are old, outdated and poorly designed which no longer meet tenants' needs.

"The Labour alternative would see 250,000 low-income people worse off than now and it would create massive waiting lists for the 60,000 state houses that we currently have."