

Media Statement: 10 April 2023

Nurses working in family doctor services being treated with disdain

Struggling essential family doctor services face more uncertainty as their nurses are again overlooked in pay parity announcements, which it claims will prompt the nursing exodus to continue and service cuts to increase.

The 31 March announcement by Health Minister, Ayesha Verrall, that 8000 nurses working in community settings are receiving significant pay awards whilst again deliberately neglecting general practice nurses will “directly and understandably increase the already 5000 New Zealand nurses potentially leaving to work in Australia”, GenPro chair and Wellsford GP, Dr Tim Malloy, says.

The General Practice Owners Association of New Zealand (GenPro) has provided the Minister and Te Whatu Ora (Health New Zealand) with considerable evidence of the massive pay gap, which is now up to 27% or \$20,000 for comparable experienced nurses. GenPro states that the evidence is not only well documented, but also clearly apparent in the numbers of nurses leaving general practice to work in hospitals or overseas.

Dr Malloy says with winter approaching the situation is worrying. “The facts are half of practices have vacancies for nurses and increasing levels of essential patient services can’t be delivered due to the chronic staff shortages.”

Minister Verrall had indicated that general practice nurses could be included in future funding announcements if evidence of a pay gap was provided. GenPro has since been in discussions with Te Whatu Ora, but GenPro chief executive Philip Grant says the agency is treating nurses working in family doctor services with “complete disdain” as officials “refuse to accept nationally published documentation which does not support the answer that fits their arbitrary budget rather than the reality on the ground”.

Mr Grant says officials have stated “they can only consider evidence relating to a fraction of the 27% pay gap, there will be no back pay or lump sum payments and, there will be no increase to the \$200 million funding already announced and allocated to other community nurses”.

He describes the Association’s discussions with Te Whatu Ora as “really disingenuous” and that whilst Te Whatu Ora has awarded significantly increased funding terms and lump sums for its own hospital-based nurses “it is treating nurses employed within family doctor services as the poor cousin and a second-class workforce”.

In 2020, nurses working in family doctor services took strike action over a number of days on the exact same issue of pay parity. Mr Grant believes further strike action over the coming winter and ahead of the general election is “a real possibility”.

Dr Malloy says reports of overwhelming demand on hospital’s emergency departments and a third infant dying of whooping cough this year are frightening.

“Reduced childhood immunisation rates are directly related to underfunding and a refusal by Te Whatu Ora to better support family doctor services. With fewer nurses there simply isn’t the ability to maintain essential patient services.”

Last month GenPro released results from a member survey that found workforce shortages and underfunding is impacting on service delivery. People are having difficulty accessing services and are also having to wait longer to get an appointment with their family doctor service.

The survey attracted 185 responses from general practices and found 46% had lost at least one nurse in the previous three months and half of all practices had a current vacancy for one or more nurses. The situation has worsened since the survey was completed as Te Whatu Ora-employed nurses received a significant additional pay increase in December 2022.

Dr Malloy says that for a government which has introduced Fair Pay legislation “its own approach which allows increasing pay inequity on its own doorstep is reprehensible”.

GenPro released *On The Brink* in November 2022, which highlighted the precarious state of family doctor services due to workforce shortages and underfunding and recommended a nine-point action plan to ensure its future sustainability.

Ends.

Further information can be obtained from:

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Notes for Editors:

In December 2022, Te Whatu Ora celebrated a "fantastic" outcome from the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) which saw pay rates for Te Whatu Ora nurses increase by a further 14% plus backdating to March 2022 and additional lump sum payments. The pay rate for a Step 7 Te Whatu Ora Registered Nurse is now \$95,340 per annum. Details of the ERA ruling can be accessed [\[here\]](#).

The nationally agreed [Primary Health Care \(PHC\) Multi-Employer Collective Agreement \(MECA\)](#) which forms the employment contract for most nurses working in family doctor services has a maximum hourly rate of just \$36.02, equivalent to a maximum annual rate of just \$75,138. Despite the PHC MECA expiring in August 2021, ongoing bargaining between general practice employers and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has yet to secure a new agreement due to the lack of funding from the government/Te Whatu Ora. The inequitable pay gap therefore continues to increase.