



Media Release: Embargoed until 8am Monday 21 November 2022

Stretched Family Doctor Services Are On The Brink

People are waiting longer to see their family doctor as workforce issues and underfunding stretch General Practice services and place them under threat.

The country's General Practice clinics have united behind their association, GenPro, to today launch a campaign '**Save Your Family Doctor Service**' highlighting the significant issues facing family doctor services.

GenPro Chair Dr Tim Malloy says a lack of funding, workforce shortages and increasing workloads are affecting the sustainability of General Practice. This is putting avoidable pressure on the rest of the health system and directly impacting the health of patients.

"It means in lots of places around New Zealand people are waiting weeks to see their family doctor, as General Practice clinics are reducing their hours and reducing services," Dr Malloy, a Wellsford GP and Distinguished Fellow of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners, says.

The campaign includes a petition asking for more resources to support workforce, fair pay and funding issues, as well as billboards to help the public understand how serious the situation is. GenPro has outlined concerns in an open letter to the Minister of Health, Hon Andrew Little.

GenPro has also released a discussion document '*On The Brink*' outlining the stark reality for family doctor services and a 9-point plan which would ensure patients, whānau and communities will be able to rely on their family doctor service in the future.

"Our essential local nurses and doctors have been undervalued and underappreciated. They have had enough, and patients are at risk as we face an unprecedented exodus from the service."

Dr Malloy says General Practice has been struggling with historic underfunding and is also struggling to attract staff, as doctors no longer want to specialise in General Practice and, like nurses, are better paid if they choose to work in hospitals or in Australia.

"The situation is dire. We received a real-terms funding cut by the Government on July 1 this year, and most members feel they have shouldered increased demand, expectations, regulation and compliance and are now also 'footing the bill' for increased costs.

"While the Government is investing billions in new health bureaucracy, it has lost focus on essential front-line services which keep people well in their communities."

He says the most recent workforce survey, completed in 2020, found more than one-third (36%) of doctors plan to retire in the next five years and more than half (58%) of GPs plan to retire in the next 10 years. Forty-three percent of family doctors are aged 55 years and older.

"It is incredibly concerning that half our doctors are planning to retire soon and there is no plan in place to

replace them. Until primary care doctors and nurses are paid as much as their overseas and secondary colleagues, General Practice will be in crisis.”

Dr Malloy says incentives are urgently needed to make General Practice a career of choice again for our medical graduates and more attractive to overseas professionals, students and to retain existing doctors and nurses.

In Tairawhiti, Three Rivers Medical Centre provides essential services to almost 20,000 enrolled patients. General Manager, Michelle Te Kira (Ngati Porou), says it is unacceptable that doctors are being forced to provide services to the most vulnerable populations on the ‘smell of an oily rag’.

Based in Gisborne, approximately 50% of patients enrolled with Three Rivers Medical are Māori and Ms Te Kira, who is also on the Board of GenPro, says, “We face significant challenges because of the significant underfunding and the gaps in the general practice funding model. The methodology used to allocate funding is flawed and confusing, and we are being presented with more complex patient needs that cannot be solved in a 15-minute appointment model.

“It is critical we have well-funded and appropriate family doctor workforce levels to ensure we can deliver adequate services and safe, high quality primary health care.”

GenPro was formed in 2020 to address the decline of General Practice and ensure that sustainable, viable and high-quality family doctor services continue to be provided for all New Zealanders. Its members include more than 400 General Practices and Urgent Care providers across the country providing essential front-line services to approximately half of the country’s enrolled patients.

Visit www.saveyourfamilydoctorservice.nz to learn more and sign the petition.

Ends.

On The Brink: Saving New Zealand’s family doctor service can be downloaded from the GenPro website here: <https://www.genpro.org.nz/docs/nov2022onthebrink.pdf>

Further information can be obtained from:

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