

Media Statement: 22 March 2023

Access to Family Doctor Services is Reducing

People are unable to access some essential family doctor services as the services are being cut due to chronic workforce shortages and underfunding in general practice.

A survey of general practices has found more than half (53%) of essential family doctor clinics have reduced the services they are offering. The General Practice Owners Association of New Zealand (GenPro) survey found a significant number (36.5%) of practices have completely withdrawn some services altogether.

“We knew the situation was desperate out there for our members, but this survey highlights exactly how tough it is and how the health of New Zealanders is being compromised because essential family doctor services are struggling to find and retain doctors and nurses to deliver the health services we need in our community,” GenPro Chief Executive Philip Grant says.

“The reality is people are having to wait longer to see their family doctor and that is having knock-on effects on people’s health as well as in our after hours’ and emergency departments. This is a significant worry as we head into a winter which experts are predicting will be particularly challenging.”

The member survey attracted 185 responses from general practices across the country and took place between October and December last year (2022).

It found only 45% of family doctors are accepting new enrolments. Mr Grant says this means 55% are not taking on new patients and will leave many people in vulnerable and high needs communities missing out on subsidised health care from a family doctor.

The survey found three in every five (61%) general practices have a current vacancy for a GP and nearly half (46%) say they lost at least one nurse in the previous three months.

Mr Grant says the situation for nurses has considerably worsened since the survey was completed, as the pay gap between general practice nurses and those working in hospitals for Te Whatu Ora has increased significantly as a result of an interim pay equity ruling by the Employment Relations Authority for Te Whatu Ora-employed nurses in December 2022. “This ruling is making it even more challenging for members to attract and retain nurses within family doctor services due to the pay gap now being between 22% and 27%.”

“We also know the doctor vacancy rate would be significantly higher if existing, older GPs who wish to retire did so. The shortage is leading to substantial additional workloads on the remaining GPs.”

The survey found half of all practices had a current vacancy for a nurse, resulting in those practices missing an average 30% of their required nursing workforce.

He says the survey results back GenPro’s *On The Brink* report released in November 2022, which found general practices are stretched and under threat and needed urgent support in order to deliver essential family doctor services across New Zealand. The report initiated a public awareness campaign seeking support from policy makers and politicians to address the issues.

Ends.

Further information can be obtained from:

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