

Media Statement: Friday 12 May 2023

International Nurses Day should be a cause for celebration, not disrespect

Today is International Nurses Day, a day to celebrate the thousands of nurses working across New Zealand and particularly those working in family doctor clinics and urgent care centres who put themselves on the front-line supporting our most vulnerable communities when they are most needed.

GenPro Chair Dr Tim Malloy says the Government is disrespecting 5,000 essential front-line nurses working in primary care who remain significantly undervalued and underfunded. “It is insulting, on International Nurses Day, that general practice nurses are paid up to 27% less than their equivalently qualified and experienced colleagues working in the hospital sector. That’s a \$20,000 difference per year on top of the significant lump sum payments and back-pay which hospital nurses have recently received and that has not been extended to general practice nurses.”

In March 2023 Health Minister Hon Ayesha Verrall announced that 8000 nurses working in community settings would receive significant pay awards whilst again deliberately neglecting general practice nurses which will “directly and understandably increase the already 5000 New Zealand nurses potentially leaving to work in Australia”, says Dr Malloy.

The situation is worrying with winter approaching. “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, which Dr Malloy says, “Feels like another potential case of the Minister being misled through inaccurate advice from officials”.

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 have stated “they can only consider evidence relating to a fraction of the 27% pay gap, there will be no equivalent back pay or lump sum payments that hospital nurses have already received and, there will be no increase to the \$200 million funding budget already allocated to other community nurses, from which pay parity for general practice nurses would also need to be funded”.

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 the Budget on 18 May, is a chance for the Government to protect patients and the wider health system by fully funding nurses working in family doctor clinics and urgent care centres at the same level and with the same lump sum settlements that they have applied to their own, Te Whatu Ora-employed and hospital-based, nurses.

Earlier this year 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.

“It is reprehensible that the government is increasing pay inequity on its own doorstep, especially given it introduced Fair Pay legislation.”

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.

GenPro's publication *On The Brink: Saving New Zealand's family doctor service* can be downloaded [[here](#)].