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Next government must address serious issues in family doctor services

The next government will need to act urgently to address the serious issues in general practice services that, left unaddressed, will lead to some communities losing their family doctor.

The General Practice Owners Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (GenPro) has today released its Election Manifesto, which asks the new government to move rapidly to address pay parity, workforce shortages, and severe underfunding.

“The situation in general practice has worsened considerably in the past year and is now so serious that family doctors around the country are at risk of closure,” GenPro Chief Executive Mark Liddle says.

“The reality is many simply don’t have the staff or funding to deliver the services and support needed in their communities. It means people are having to wait longer to see a doctor, if they can enrol to see one at all, and they are having to pay more to see a doctor,” he says. “These issues are making it more difficult for people to access essential family doctor services.”

Last month GenPro released a member survey that found 88% were concerned about their future financial viability and 35% had made a loss in the last quarter of the financial year.

GenPro’s Election Manifesto has three asks – pay parity for nurses, initiatives to increase the workforce, and better and more fair funding.

“None of the major parties have announced anything that will give New Zealanders better access to the essential services available at their family doctors.”

Mr Liddle says the pay gap between general practice nurses and those employed by Te Whatu Ora in hospitals is now between 15% to 35%, depending on the role and experience.

“The gap means an average of two nurses have left a doctors’ clinic for better pay in our hospitals or overseas in the past six months. The staffing situation won’t change while the gap remains, and it has left 43% of our practices with current nurse vacancies.”

Mr Liddle says one of the best initiative’s the new government can do to ensure people can access a family doctor is to incentivise doctors to remain in practice, rather than taking retirement.

“More than 50% of family doctors are due to retire by 2030 and there isn’t an available workforce to replace them. The outlook is really worrying, given 60% of practices have vacancies for doctors now.”

He says a greater percentage of the health budget needs to be directed to front-line services in primary care.

“The ongoing underfunding of family doctor services is leading to reductions in services, with our survey finding more than half (53%) of our practices had cut services in the past six months.”

Mr Liddle says the capitation funding model used to fund general practice needs updating and the government’s own reviews into general practice funding have found funding increases of 10% to 20% are needed to address some of the unmet need and inequity in access to healthcare.

“The issues within the sector are not new and have been promoted and discussed for years. The next government must address these key areas to appropriately fund and support family doctor services. If this doesn’t happen, the health of all New Zealanders is at risk.”

ENDS.

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