

PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION MEDIA RELEASE

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Ageing Population, Ageing Health Workforce Double Whammy

Delegates at the Public Health Association Conference were warned today that all attempts to attract and retain high quality health workers to New Zealand will be ineffective unless the looming GP shortage is addressed.

Janet Amey, Population Health Advisor at Pinnacle General Practice Network, told delegates at Turangawaewae Marae, Ngaruawahia, that the number of young doctors New Zealand is attracting to become GPs is not high enough to offset the number approaching retirement.

“New Zealand’s doctors are ageing fast. The percentage of GPs in our network aged 55 and over has increased five percent to 25 percent in just three years,” she said.

Pinnacle encompasses the four midland DHB areas of Gisborne, Lakes, Waikato and Taranaki containing a population of almost 500,000 people. It is in the third year of a first-of-its kind study into the demographic make-up of the general practice workforce.

While the government has increased the number of places for students in medical school, and established Health Workforce New Zealand, this is not enough to address the GP shortage, Ms Amey said.

“We now very much rely on immigrant doctors to prop up our primary health care system. More than half the doctors in Pinnacle were trained overseas – 54 percent. That means we are competing with very attractive overseas working destinations for the skills of these people. Even so, on average they are not particularly young - 40 to 49 - and none of them work in rural areas that are desperate for general practitioners.”

Ms Amey said two other trends complicate the scene.

“There are many more young women doctors now which is great, but many of them have young families and do not want to work fulltime.

“Secondly, as GPs are ageing, so too is the general population. In 2006, about 30 percent of consultations were with over 65-year olds. We predict that in 2021, that will grow to about 38 percent. That means a higher demand for consultations but many will be more complex and take longer as older people seek help to manage their chronic conditions,” she says.

Allowing general practitioners to work past retirement age, perhaps on a part time basis, is a possible way of retaining specialist skills and experience.

Ms Amey told delegates that while the focus has been on the workforce shortage in hospitals, especially a dearth of specialist hospital staff – it is the primary sector that most people interact with.

“The primary sector is the ‘gatekeeper’ for the flow of people into hospitals and if that doesn’t work properly then hospitals are going to be swamped with patients.”

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