

+NEWS |

Health minister hints at primary care funding change



Patrice Dougan

pdougan@nzdoctor.co.nz

12

Friday 21 July

2023, 03:36 PM

4 minutes to

Read



Health minister Ayesha Verrall speaking at the GP23 conference in Auckland [Image: NZD]

As health minister Ayesha Verrall stepped on stage at the RNZCGP's GP23 conference this morning, president Samantha Murton handed her a bright orange badge bearing the words "My work counts".

Dr Verrall told the audience she hoped, by the end of her speech, they would realise she had been "wearing one of these badges all along".

One of her key priorities as minister had been to focus on how to strengthen general practice, she said.

Dr Verrall later called the primary care funding model not fit for purpose and said agencies would start engaging with the sector soon about investment, financing and funding settings in primary care.

READ MORE

- **NEWS: RNZCGP wins for training funding and conditions to be celebrated: Murton**
- **OPINION: DIARY NOTE: Conference for General Practice GP23 fully under way tomorrow**
- **NEWS: 'Big shifts over time' says plan: Plan shows over 8000 health workers needed**

“I know you’re a highly skilled, hardworking workforce, committed to providing the very best level of care within our health system,” she said. “As minister, I have a desire to listen to your experience, understand the significant challenges faced in your work, seek your opinion and act decisively to ensure government is working to tackle the issues that matter most to you.”

Hinting at a primary care announcement to come, Dr Verrall said she would make sure information on the process to address the challenges faced by the sector and to support a transformed primary and community health sector would be available soon, including how best to engage with that process.

“I have heard very clearly from general practice representatives that they want to engage, and the sector wants to engage, on change, so that means the Government doesn’t come forward with [a plan], instead we will outline a work plan where we can work on these issues together.

“I am absolutely committed to making sure the government properly supports you so that you can support the health and wellbeing of our communities to the best of your abilities. You have such an important role in realising the promise of our reformed health system.”

The minister said localities would play an important role in primary and community care, and in making the health system more equitable and localised within a national system.

Localities would offer “seamless connected care, closer to home, with a better balance of national and consistent standards and local tailoring”.

Workforce

On workforce – which she described as one of her top three priorities, and a problem decades in the making but “unmasked by the pandemic” – Dr Verrall said training and retaining the general practice workforce was “critically important”.

“I don’t shy away from the fact that there’s a lot of work to do to remedy these issues and ensure general practice is an appealing career option,” she said.

Part of that included ensuring general practice was held in high esteem in medical school, she said, outlining how she had made clear to the vice-chancellors of both medical schools that she wanted the focus to be on encouraging and supporting future doctors into general practice and rural medicine.

“I am serious about creating change that will support your sector to provide quality and sustainable care in New Zealand.”

Funding

The minister said she had heard concerns about the funding model for primary care, and said: “At a high level, I agree that our funding model for general practice isn’t fit for purpose, and we must address it if we are to achieve the intent of the health reforms...this will be part of our ongoing work.”

Funding would be a main area of focus, she said, hinting at a primary care investment announcement.

“Agencies will start engaging with you soon about investment, financing and funding settings in primary care. I expect I will be able to share more details on this with you soon.”

After a question from the floor about how the Government intended to fund all its plans to support a functioning health sector, after prime minister Chris Hipkins had ruled out a wealth tax and a capital gains tax, Dr Verrall said the Government had increased health sector funding by 45 per cent within the existing tax structure.

“Whether you fund the health system is a decision, and I’m very proud to be from a party that has answered that in the affirmative, that we are going to fund the health system as a whole, better.”

The wealth tax, as a revenue neutral policy proposal, wouldn’t have made a difference to funding healthcare, she said.

Voices heard

Asked how GPs could get their voices heard in the health system and how general practice can be seen as a crucial part, instead of the emphasis being “on very expensive health delivered in a hospital setting”, the minister agreed primary care should be at the forefront.

Her vision, she said, was one that reoriented health towards care in the community, “near your home, tailored to you” with an emphasis on preventing illness. General practice was key to that, she said.

However, Te Whatu Ora had inherited “all of the biases and perverse incentives that were a part of our old system and that’s what we’re trying to change”. It would take a lot of work, but she wanted to see health funding shift into primary care and away from hospitals.

“It’s a lot of work because fundamentally we need to reimagine the health system as something that saves [people] when you’re in trouble, to a health system as something that keeps [them] well. It’s a big project, but I’m here to help you on it.”

Conference over three days

The three-day conference at Auckland’s Aotea Centre continues until Sunday afternoon.

Just over 700 delegates are attending.

Michelle, capture your time to Read, Watch, Listen or Delve by clicking CAPTURE.

CAPTURE

You can view your CAPTURE RECORD here.