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Tight timeline for practice nurses' vote as pay equity claim thrown into mix



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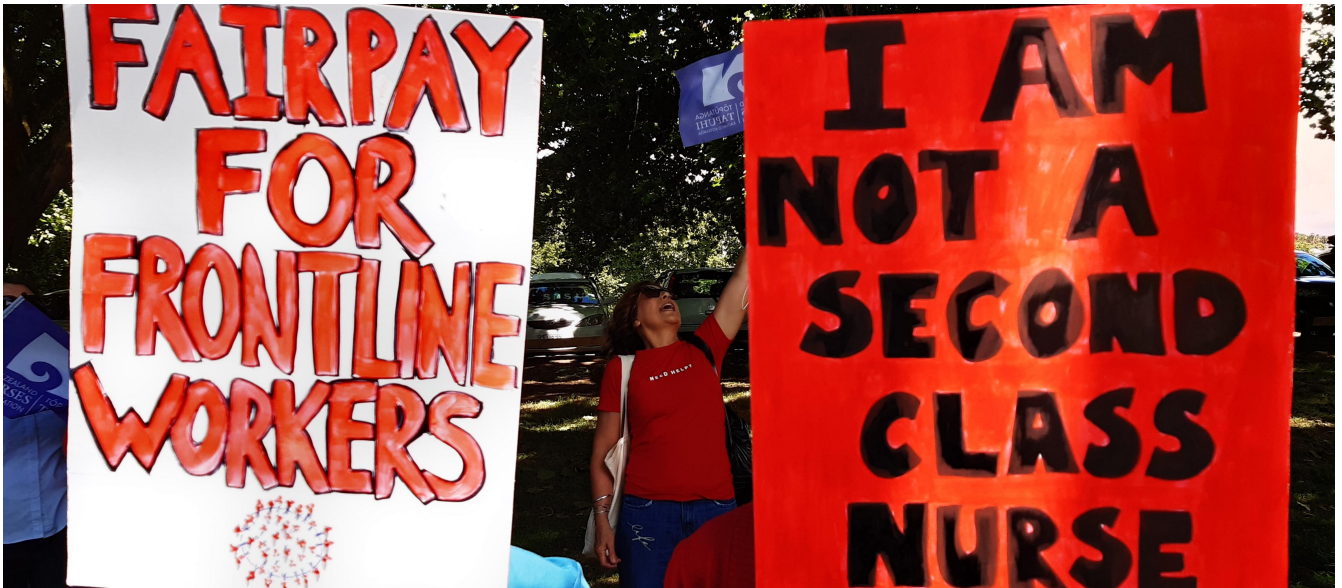
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Tuesday 15 August

2023, 04:42 PM

4 minutes to Read





Practice nurses are being told that accepting a pay deal and lodging a pay equity claim are linked
[Image: NZD]

Practice nurses and their employers are being pressured to ratify a new pay deal soon or risk it imploding and with it the grounds for lodging a pay equity claim.

The deal, which falls well short of closing the widening pay gap with hospital nurses, centres around a multi-employer collective agreement (MECA) that expires on 31 August and reverts to individual contracts.

The 500-plus general practices party to the primary health care MECA are yet to finish ratifying the deal and 3500 NZNO nurses and administrator members are due to vote on it next week.

The union has told MECA members that, if the deal isn't ratified, it will mean the "destruction" of the agreement and that it needs a ratified collective agreement to be able to lodge a pay equity claim.

Confusion reigns

Michael McIlhone, a national primary care nursing leader spokesperson, says feedback he has received from nurses is that the tight turnaround date has created a sense of pressure and confusion.

“I think some members are struggling with what they should do right now so they don’t prejudice themselves going forward,” says Mr McIlhone, co-chair of the General Practice New Zealand nurse leaders’ group.

But he adds it is pleasing that union NZNO sees that, for primary health care and general practice, “there’s definitely a need for pay parity and subsequently pay equity”.

Pay deal details being shared

Practice nurses and employers are understood to be angry and exhausted after two years of bargaining and lobbying failed to win funding that would cover practices to match the latest Te Whatu Ora nurses' pay rates.

Details of the new proposed pay deal, and a proposal to vote on lodging a pay equity claim for primary health care nurses, are being shared this week by NZNO in online meetings with members.

The deal, based on 95 per cent of the Te Whatu Ora interim pay equity rates, includes a new step 7 on the basic pay scale with a pay rate of \$43.42 an hour. The top of the Te Whatu Ora basic pay scale under the interim pay equity offer was \$95,430 (\$45.70 an hour). But following Te Whatu Ora NZNO members ratifying the final pay equity settlement, plus a new collective agreement, their step 7 basic pay rate has grown to \$103,630 and will increase to \$106,738 in April next year.

Frustration understood

NZNO chief executive Paul Goulter says he “completely understands the frustration” with the widening pay gap with hospital nurses.

“And it’s not just with nurses it’s also with employers as well obviously as they are staring down the barrel of another big gap.”

He says it is a “real concern” to members that the PHC MECA offer has been left to this late stage as “the worst thing that could happen would be for that MECA to expire”.

Mr Goulter says a ratified MECA also created a “really useful platform” to do things like the pay equity process.

In a bulletin to members, he said he believed a pay equity claim for the primary health care sector would result in “same or similar wages” as those employed by Te Whatu Ora.

Members are to vote next week on both ratifying the MECA and on whether or not to lodge a pay equity claim.

GenPro open to pay equity claim

General Practice Owners Association chief executive Mark Liddle says the 314 employers the association represents in the MECA bargaining are expected to have responded within the next 24 hours.

Mr Liddle says GenPro has not been formally approached yet about NZNO lodging a pay equity claim but says it is “no surprise”, given the hospital nurse equity settlement set a strong case for a claim by primary care nurses.

If pay equity was fully funded, it would likely be supported by employers as a good way to raise nurses pay and help with recruitment and retention, he says.

“But equally the employers are under significant financial pressure at the moment and so the ability to increase nurses’ pay has to be balanced by the requisite increase in funding.”

So he says if NZNO does lodge a claim GenPro would want to be around the table to ensure it could work to get the best deal for nurses and the best deal for employers.

ProCare employers close also

Bindi Norwell is chief executive at ProCare, whose employer bargaining arm represents nationwide about 150 of the MECA practices. Mrs Norwell says to date about 70 per cent of the practices it represents have responded.

“We are confident that we will have heard back from all practices by the end of the week,” she says by email.

It is clear the current primary care funding on offer does not feasibly allow for any further uplift in pay for general practice nurses at this time, Mrs Norwell says.

While there is talk of a pay equity claim, “our focus remains clearly on ratifying the primary healthcare MECA for now”, she says. Practices have welcomed the MECA’s recommendation of a lump sum rather than the need for extensive backpay calculations.

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