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Urgent general practice leaders meeting to discuss funding with review in wings



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Practices are invited to fill in a survey on overhead costs to guide advice to the new interim health agencies on “options for the future of primary care funding” [Image from iStock]

An urgent meeting will be held by general practice leaders tomorrow to discuss funding in the wake of the new health agencies starting to seek advice on future funding options.

General Practice Leaders Forum chair Fiona Bolden says forum members at last week's meeting agreed to meet again tomorrow, particularly to discuss processes for deciding any new funding model.

"If there is to be a funding review of general practice, which we are told there will be, it's certainly overdue, they need to make sure they get the right processes to do that," says Dr Bolden, who is also chair of the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network.

"And that's going to need a lot of work with people who actually [deliver general practice services] rather than just bringing in management consultancies who don't."

Practice costs survey

Vanessa Weenink, chair of the forum's Contracted Provider Caucus, and Dr Bolden told *New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa* they were not aware of any formal funding review under way as yet.

But Dr Bolden says the Practice Managers & Administrators Association of New Zealand (PMAANZ) had been asked by consultants Sapere to send out a questionnaire to all practices on funding issues.

PMAANZ chair Michelle Te Kira says it was asked just before Christmas to send out the survey to members to gather information on the additional costs faced by practices.

The foreword to the survey [see link below] says Sapere has been “commissioned to provide advice to interim Health New Zealand and the interim Maori Health Authority on options for the future of primary care funding”. The new entities come into being on 1 July.

“While there is information that we can use on cost for many aspects of general practice, expenditure by different kinds of practice on rent and overheads is often invisible,” says the foreword. It concludes by saying it hopes the survey means Sapere can “provide an improved understanding of the true costs of operating general practice”.

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Concern at lack of input

Dr Weenink, who is also chair of NZMA's GP Council, says while the caucus was consulted regarding COVID-19 in the community funding, it has had no requests for input into changes to primary care funding.

This is apart from the upcoming annual discussions on the cost-pressure formula findings now used to calculate the capitation and reasonable fee increases as part of the PHO Services Agreement Amendment Protocol (PSAAP) process. That cost-pressure formula was developed by Sapere for the Ministry of Health and DHBs in 2006 and calculated by Sapere annually since then.

But Dr Weenink says outside of the PSAAP process, caucus member organisations were aware of primary care funding working groups and advisory roles that did not include them.

“What we would broadly like to see is a requirement for engagement with the caucus regarding funding because we have the mandate from our membership and representation to do that.

“Whereas what appears to happen is that, because of the small nature of the sector and everybody knows everybody, that it’s almost like a shoulder-tapping exercise where they choose the people that give them the answers that they like.”

Caucus members are the General Practice Owners Association of Aotearoa New Zealand, NZMA GP Council, RNZCGP and the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network.

Wheels ‘wobbling’ under pressure

Dr Bolden says prior to tomorrow's meeting forum members are in agreement about ongoing issues around general practice funding undermining the sector's ability to provide sustainable care.

She says the issues have been highlighted by the pandemic and the forum is keen to work together to ensure sector organisations are involved in finding a funding solution that "truly reflects the costs" of general practice.

An area of particular "disquiet" has been the unfunded infrastructure costs, like ventilation and needing red stream spaces, faced by practices during the pandemic.

“When you’ve got a system that has not had proper funding for decades and decades and you start pushing it into a pandemic that’s when the wheels start wobbling.

“I think the wheels are wobbling pretty hard at the moment.”

Survey being shared again

Ms Te Kira says the survey was sent out just on Christmas Eve and had fielded only about 40 responses by early in the new year. It is now being shared again by more organisations to try to get more robust data.

The 19-question survey asks questions about overhead costs [including rent, IT and written-off patient fees], staffing numbers, square meterage of practices, and demographic information about a practice's enrolled population, including whether it is a Very Low Cost Access practice. It also seeks general comments on funding.

The Sapere foreword says it does not require any practice-identifiable information and it will prepare a summary of the aggregate results that will be shared on the Sapere website.

Click here for the survey on general practice costs – Sapere Research Group on behalf of interim Health New Zealand and interim Māori Health Authority.

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