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While we were out – catching up



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Wednesday 17 January 2024, 03:57 PM

6 minutes to Read



News didn't stop when we left the office on 14 December [Image: Kiran Ck on Unsplash]

Summer brings long, lazy days for many, but there's still news to be found. As we left the office on 14 December, media releases continued arriving in our inboxes. Editor **Barbara Fountain** trawls through the offerings to find the news happening while we were out

As we were signing off on 14 December, the annual New Zealand Health Survey landed. Reporter Fiona Cassie **took a look and found a key finding:** a significant jump in the number of people reporting waiting time as a barrier to GP care. About one in five people report that waiting too long for an appointment has put them off visiting a GP – nearly twice as many as the previous year.

The following week, General Practice NZ, the RNZCGP and Hauora Taiwhenua responded to the findings with media releases calling on the Government to take note of the conclusions of the 2022 Sapere report, which detailed significant underinvestment in primary care.

Porirua-based specialist GP and GPNZ chair Bryan Betty says: **“Our capitation-based funding system needs redesign.** We need to rebalance the health system with investment in primary care now before the situation worsens.”

Sidenotes

Sapere report on future approach to capitation funding

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Wellington-based specialist GP and RNZCGP
president Samantha Murton says: "**These statistics will only worsen** if we do not implement solutions that retain our current workforce and support them to train and grow the next generation of specialist GPs and rural hospital doctors...If the Government is going to invest in one thing for the health sector, it must be implementing a renewed model of capitation as outlined in the Sapere report."

Hauora Taiwhenua chair and rural specialist GP Fiona Bolden likewise **urges the Coalition Government to implement the recommendations** of the Sapere report into general practice funding, which recognises that base funding needs to reflect rurality, comorbidity, deprivation and high-need populations.

Dr Bolden says a recent survey of rural practices showed that the situation is "truly dire". Sixty per cent of rural practices are looking for one or more doctors. Some have been unsuccessful in recruiting replacements after advertising for more than two years, and most rural practices report low morale and unsustainable finances.

And in further news...

New faces for GPNZ

GPNZ, which is in the process of rebranding as Primary Care New Zealand, gains **new committee members**. They are Barbara Stevens, chief executive of Auckland PHO; Francesco Lentini, board member of ProCare Health; Mark Vella, chief executive of Total Healthcare; and Mary Morrissey, chair of PMAANZ. *15 December*

Aussies ban engineering stone

A ban on the use, supply and manufacture of engineered stone by Australian state and federal governments is **welcomed by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists**. The silica dust produced when the stone is cut cause lung cancer and other serious respiratory diseases, including silicosis. *15 December*

Freshwater fighters

Fifty freshwater experts nationwide send an **open letter to prime minister Christopher Luxon and Cabinet colleagues** urging them not to touch the country's national freshwater policy. This followed an announcement that Cabinet had agreed to replace the National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management 2020 and its central decision-making framework, Te Mana o te Wai. The letter reads: "New Zealand's rivers, lakes and aquifers are in a dire state. If you proceed with your proposals to undo the country's freshwater policy, they will only get worse...To remove, replace or rewrite our country's national freshwater policy at this time, so soon after it has been brought in, would be a terrible mistake." *18 December*

Perennial troubleshooter for Te Whatu Ora

Health sector troubleshooter Ken Whelan is appointed as **Crown observer for Te Whatu Ora**. Health minister Shane Reti says Mr Whelan, a health sector veteran with 30 years' experience, including as Crown monitor at Counties Manukau and Waikato DHBs, will assist the Te Whatu Ora board and management to work to overcome a range of issues, including health workforce and hospital wait times. Mr Whelan commenced his role immediately and will advise Dr Reti through formal quarterly reporting and other updates as necessary. *19 December*

Performance metrics released

Clinical performance metrics published by Te Whatu Ora for the period 1 July to 30 September 2023 show small improvements in the **areas of mental health wait times** and childhood immunisation rates. But hospital pressures continue in the area of specialist appointments, planned care and emergency department performance. The number of people waiting for a first specialist appointment continues to rise. Te Whatu Ora interim chief clinical officer Richard Sullivan says though reducing this number will be a key priority in coming months, in the short term, the number may rise further. *19 December*

Action on social media threats

A social media post **threatening to release private health information** is met with concern by Te Whatu Ora. The data related to a leak of information in early December and has since been subject to a non-publication order from the Employment Relations Authority. Agency chief executive Margie Apa says it would take considerable effort, but someone with expert technical knowledge could potentially identify a very small number of individuals from the data. The agency will contact people “significantly” affected when current investigations are complete. A Te Whatu Ora employee, Barry Young, 56, appeared in court on 18 December in relation to the initial breach, pleading not guilty, RNZ reports. *20 December*

Mini Budget disappoints

The **Coalition Government's mini-Budget** sees finance minister Nicola Willis promising \$7.47 billion in operations savings and additional revenue. The only response found in the email inbox came from the NZ Nurses Organisation and it was disappointment at the lack of priority given to health. Kaiwhakahaere Kerri Nuku says: "This Government campaigned on big talk of funding frontline health services, so why is this **\$7.47 billion failing to make its way to the frontline?** The total Budget allocation for health services for 2022/23 was \$24.638 billion, however, Te Whatu Ora's recently published annual report shows actual spending was \$26.703 billion. For the financial year 2022/23, Te Whatu Ora reported a net deficit of \$1.013 billion. The current Government has only committed its spending in health to match inflation – for context, CPI was 5.6 per cent in September 2023." The release of the mini-Budget coincided with the **Half Year Economic and Fiscal Update** from Treasury. *20 December*

New vaccine approved

Medsafe approves an application by Pfizer for an updated COVID-19 vaccine for the XBB.1.5 strain to be used in New Zealand. Pharmac's director, pharmaceuticals, Geraldine MacGibbon says in a media release **there would be no changes to eligibility for vaccinations** at present. *20 December*

Iwi calls on ministers

Ngātiwai Trust Board's publicly appeals to health minister Shane Reti and Winston Peters, both iwi members, to halt the repeal of the smokefree legislation amendments. The public letter appealed to Dr Reti as health minister and a senior member of the National Party. "...we know that you have influence, and we also know that you see the proposed repeal of the Smokefree Act as morally wrong, both as a doctor and as an uri of Ngātiwai." Health Coalition Aotearoa commended the iwi for **holding Dr Reti and Mr Peters to account** as the smokefree law will dramatically reduce smoking rates in Aotearoa, and its repeal will cost thousands of lives. Associate health minister (tobacco regulation) Casey Costello is also a Ngātiwai member. *20 December*

More money for immunisations

A \$50-million package for hauora partners **over two years to help lift Māori immunisation rates** is announced by health minister Shane Reti. Over the two years, \$30 million will go to Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency providers to work with those most at risk – pēpi, hāpu māma and also kaumātua. An additional \$10 million will go to North Island partners and \$10 million to South Island partners. At the same time, Dr Reti launches My Health Record, an app giving people improved access to their personal health records and confirms the expansion of the Aotearoa Immunisation Register to support vaccination outreach activity. Current Māori immunisation rates are 66.8 per cent at eight months, 70.1 per cent at 24 months and 69.7 per cent at five years. *21 December*

Overdose antidote provided

Pharmac announces it will **supply overdose-reversing medicine naloxone** to needle exchange sites. Pharmac director, pharmaceuticals, Geraldine MacGibbon, says the agency was made aware in late September of fake oxycodone tablets being sold illegally that contain a synthetic opioid, which is about six times more potent than fentanyl. There had been at least one death and several hospitalisations arising from its use. Naloxone can reverse the life-threatening effects of many synthetic opioids. *21 December*

Funding to train pharmacist prescribers

Sixty more pharmacists a year will be funded to undertake prescribing training, with Te Whatu Ora providing almost \$5 million to cover study fees, travel grants and support from a medical practitioner. The **candidates will be divided equally between Auckland and Otago universities**. The part-time postgraduate programme will specifically support and target qualified Māori, Pacific and rural candidates, as well as other demographics, and will run from 2024 to 2026. *22 December*

Makeover for journal

From 19 January, the New Zealand Medical Journal **will be free for subscribers**, publishers Pasifika Medical Association Group announces. The 136-year-old journal was taken on by the association following the collapse of the New Zealand Medical Association in 2022. Editor-in-chief Frank Frizelle says institutional subscribers will be encouraged to pay a subscription. *10 January*

Record for telehealth provider

Telehealth provider Practice Plus reports its busiest month, **supporting more than 1500 patients through Christmas and New Year**, from 23 December to 7 January. Practice Plus clinical director Emma Calvert says the busiest day was 29 December, when the 11 doctors rostered to work saw 120 patients. "Ninety per cent of appointments were resolved by the telehealth appointment, and we maintained a 4.7/5-star patient experience rating, with much of the feedback relating to how easy the service was to use and the relief to get an appointment quickly." *12 January*

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