

Briefing for information

Comment on Infometrics Report on Nurse Workforce

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To:	Hon Simeon Brown, Minister of Health		
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Contact for telephone discussion

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Minister's office to complete:

☐ Noted☐ Seen☐ Needs change☐ Withdrawn☐ See Minister's Notes☐ Overtaken by events

Comment:

Briefing for information

Comment on Infometrics Report on Nurse Workforce

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To: Hon Simeon Brown, Minister of Health

Purpose of report

1. This briefing provides commentary on the Infometrics report *How many more nurses does New Zealand need?* (the Report) released in September 2025 commissioned by the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO). It focuses on the Report's key findings, particularly safe staffing in public hospitals.

Summary

2. The Report was commissioned by NZNO "to quantify the current nursing shortage in New Zealand based on current funding levels and safe staffing levels". It focuses on safe staffing data from public hospitals but also comments on nursing numbers in other employment settings.
3. Some data used in the report is from 2022 and 2023, a period marked by a severe nursing shortage across the health system following the COVID-19 pandemic. It took more than 18 months after the borders reopened to recruit sufficient internationally qualified nurses (IQNs) to address this shortfall. More recent analysis shows strong growth in the employed nursing workforce, with increases of 15.6% in 2023/24 and 6.2% in 2024/25 respectively.
4. NZNO's analysis of Care Capacity Demand Management (CCDM) for shifts below target (i.e. that 28% of hospital shifts were below target and 38% of shifts were most likely understaffed between January 2022 and November 2024) is included in the Report. Again, a significant part of this period was during the nursing shortage.
5. Health NZ have provided an interpretation of NZNO's findings and provided 2025 data that show a 5.1% improvement in shifts below target (from 28% to 23% of shifts below targets). This improvement occurred alongside an increase in patient shifts in 2024 and 2025. Total occupied bed days in all hospitals have continued to increase over this period by 116,141 or 5%.
6. The Report uses different methodologies and variable data sources across different settings and interprets constraints on access to health care as indicators of nursing shortage. However, it does not address prioritisation or affordability. The author acknowledges that some calculations of shortages and projected demand in this report are crude.

Recommendation

We recommend you:

- a) note that the Ministry will continue to work with Health NZ on safe staffing and update as appropriate.

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The report uses outdated data to quantify staffing numbers for nursing

7. The Report collects vacancy data for five employment settings (Health NZ funded services¹, Aged Residential Care (ARC), Corrections, Plunket and Mental Health and Addictions (MHA)) which the author estimates is two-thirds of the nursing workforce. He estimates total vacancies of just under 2,500 FTE.
8. Information in the Report has been drawn from different periods and is out of date. The Report includes data from Health NZ from June 2024, ARC from 2023 and MHA from 2022. There is likely a double count of vacancies as 81% of mental health nurses worked in Health NZ. Both Corrections and Plunket are relatively small employers and had 26 vacancies between them.
9. The Report includes estimates of how many additional nurses are needed for safe staffing in a range of settings. These are based on CCDM data for Health NZ and various population-based measures of unmet health need for the other settings. The Report quantifies these estimates for four settings which represent just over half of the workforce (Health NZ funded hospitals, ARC, MHA, General Practice (GP) Table 2, p9).

Table 2

Estimates of nurses needed for optimal care

Nursing shortage	Year	Metric	Funded FTEs	Shortage	Increase required	Method
Te Whatu Ora funded hospitals	2022-24	Total FTEs	21,689	635	3%	To meet CCDM recommended staffing
Aged residential care	2024	RN FTEs	4,581	1,550	34%	Australian mandated care minutes
General practice	2024	Total FTEs	4,884	274	6%	To cover unenrolled population
Mental health and addiction	2022	Total FTEs	3,910	330	8%	To meet unmet mental health population needs
Total			35,064	2,789	8%	
Alternative measures of shortage						
Te Whatu Ora funded services	2023			28%		Ward shifts below target
Aged residential care (ACANZ members)	2023			83%		Facilities not fully staffed

Source: Infometrics calculations

10. The Report estimates the workforce would need to increase by 2,800 FTE (8%) to achieve safe staffing levels. That includes increases of 2.9% (or 635 FTE) in Health NZ funded hospitals based on CCDM data, 34% or 1550 FTE in ARC based on minimum safe staffing levels set in Australia in October 2024, 6% or 274 FTE in General Practice based on the

¹ Data definition not stated in the report. Assumed to mean the total employed nursing workforce in HNZ covering both clinical hospital and community.

unenrolled population and 8% or 330 FTE in MHA based on 9.7% of unmet need for mental health services reported by participants in the NZ Health Survey².

Ministry analysis shows that the nursing workforce has continued to increase over the past 2 years

The growing nursing workforce

11. The Report shows that the public hospital workforce grew by 32% between 2013 and 2023 (Chart 1 p15) and the number of nurses employed in all settings by 33% over the same period, based on Nursing Council data (Chart 2 p16). From 2019-2023 Health NZ nursing numbers grew at a faster rate between 2019 and 2023 than other settings (4.4% compared with 3.9%).
12. We have analysed the Nursing Council data (from 31 March 2025) which shows that there was a growth of 27.5% in Health NZ clinical (hospital) nurses from 31 March 23 to 31 March 25. The total headcount increased by 6694 and the FTE increased by 5670 nurses. The total employed workforce (Health NZ and all other settings) experienced an increase of 15.6% or 8000 FTEs from 2023-2025.
13. This analysis contradicts statements in the Report that there has been an ongoing recruitment freeze, related to cost cutting, in Health NZ since mid-2024. The 2024/25 data shows that the headcount has continued to grow but more slowly, increasing by a further 719 (2.4%) or 636.5 FTE. The total employed workforce increased at a higher rate by 6.2% over the same period 2024-2025.

All NZ-based nurses as of 31 Mar of the year

Main Employment	Headcounts total		
	Year 2023	Year 2024	Year 2025
Health NZ - clinical (hospital)	24186	30161	30880
All Employment	63645	69153	73577
	23/25 Growth %	24/25 Growth %	
Health NZ - clinical (hospital)	27.7%	2.4%	
All Employment	15.6%	6.4%	
Main Employment	FTE total		
	Year 2023	Year 2024	Year 2025
Health NZ - clinical (hospital)	20603	25635	26272
All Employment	49060	53735	57060
	23/25 Growth %	24/25 Growth %	
Health NZ - clinical (hospital)	27.5%	2.5%	
All Employment	16.3%	6.2%	

14. We also analysed 2025 Nursing Council data for ARC and MHA, which show increases in both headcount and FTE, exceeding the shortages estimated in the Report. ARC nursing

² The most recent NZ Health Survey reports 10.7% unmet mental health need for professional services.

workforce grew by over 2,000 FTE, and MHA by 900 FTE. General Practice nursing numbers could not be estimated due to limitations in the granularity of current employment codes.

	Infometrics calculations 2024 (Table2)		All NZ-based nurses as of 31 Mar 2025	
Main practice setting	Funded FTE	Shortage	FTE total	Headcounts total
Aged Residential Care (ARC)	4,581	1,550	6599	7518
Mental Health and Addiction (all) (MHA)	3,910	330	4790	5308

15. Australia also had a 4.5% growth in nurses from 2019 to 2024. Its largest gain was in 2023 to 2024 (6.5%). The fastest growing period for Health NZ was 2023-24 after the borders opened and immigration settings were made more favourable. This coincided with many Internationally Qualified Nurses (IQNs) seeking to change country of work post the COVID pandemic.

The report indicates Health NZ hospitals were short staffed based on Care Capacity Demand Management data

16. The Report states that NZNO analysed CCDM for shifts below target from 540 hospital wards from 1 January 2022 to 31 December 2023. NZNO found that on average 28% of shifts were understaffed in 2023. CCDM care variance hours data from 1.69 million shifts from 2022 to 2024 in 592 hospital wards and emergency departments was analysed to estimate the nurse FTE shortage.
17. The Report concludes that 38% of shifts were under-staffed and on average hospitals were short 635 nurses every shift between 1 January 2022 and 30 November 2024. The report also notes that care variance was worst in winter and comments on facilities that were frequently understaffed and that some ward types were more affected than others.
18. The Report does acknowledge that for much of this period Health NZ was short staffed. The author is concerned that there was not a significant improvement in 2024 after the recruitment of significant FTE and the states that 1250 nurse FTE vacancies is an indicator of shortage.

Health NZ analysis confirms high rates of understaffed shifts during report period, with signs of improvement

19. Health NZ confirms that the data used in the Report is broadly accurate, noting that between 1 January 2022 and 30 November 2024, 62% of shifts had a care variance of zero or higher, indicating that staffing met or exceeded the requirements for safe patient care. Note that the data reflects some service groups within Health NZ but not all areas.
20. Health NZ analysis indicates improved shift staffing relative to demand. Shift below target data improved from 28% of shifts in 2023 to 24.7% in 2024 and 23.6% in August 2025. This has been achieved despite an overall increase in patient shifts in 2024 and

2025 compared with 2023. Total bed days have continued to increase over this period by 116,141 or 5%.

21. Care hours variance from 2023 analysed by Health NZ shows that the average shortfall per shift has reduced by 162 FTE to 567 from 729. The percentage of shifts with a negative care variance remains high at 37% but the volume of care hours required is declining.
22. Given the increasing patient workload, it is likely that some short staffing across shifts persists and will be experienced differently across districts and specialties. Health NZ has identified it has to improve technology, models of care and service delivery models to improve this. This includes reviewing skills mix and growing capacity to improve productivity and reduce demand on the workforce (New Zealand Health Workforce Plan 2024).

Next steps: safe staffing improvements

23. s 9(2)(f)(iv)

24. The Ministry of Health has completed a literature review evidence brief and is working to identify further levers to progress this work.

Recommendation

We recommend you:

- a) Note that the Ministry will continue to work with Health NZ on safe staffing and update you as appropriate.



Lorraine Hetaraka
Chief Nursing Officer
Strategy and Policy
Date: 9 October 2025

Hon Simeon Brown
Minister of Health
Date:

ENDS.

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