



MEDIA RELEASE

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Medical physicists intensify strike action.

Beginning today medical physicists at all six DHBs that offer radiation oncology are undertaking partial strike action. In Auckland, Hamilton Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin overtime bans are in place whilst in Palmerston North the medical physicists will not be undertaking work on one of the four operating linear accelerators (linac). Action is set to intensify in coming weeks if there is no change in the DHB position.

So what is the role of Physicists in cancer treatment? And why do they see the need to go on strike?

Medical Physicists work behind the scenes of radiation therapy cancer treatment and ensure that the treatment machines (Linear accelerators) give millimetre accuracy dose to cancer patients. In other western countries (such as the U.S., Australia, France, UK) there have been incidents when Physicists have made mistakes calibrating machines and hundreds of patients have received the wrong dose. Too large a dose can kill the patient but equally too small a dose will not cure the cancer, so these errors can be fatal.

'It is ironic that the highest paid Medical Physicist in New Zealand is paid less than the lowest paid consultant doctor for a similar level of training, and yet that Medical Physicist carries responsibility for the safe and accurate treatment of thousands of patients in their region.' said APEX Union Physicists National President, Christine Thompson.

In the past few years radiation treatment has become more complex which has led to better cure rates for our cancer patients, however these improvements would not have been possible without increased work by the Medical Physicists, and has required significant increases in the Medical Physicist workforce.

In some hospitals the numbers of Physicists employed are far below internationally recommended levels. The DHB's claim that there are only two unfilled vacancies nationally and there is an adequate supply of Physicists in New Zealand. The DHBs hide the staffing shortages by not creating posts they are unable to fill.

In June 2014 The Ministry of Health released 'The Radiation Oncology National Linear Accelerator and Workforce Plan', which reviews radiation oncology services as well as the outlook over the next five to 10 years. The report states that, 'For sustainability there will need to be improved retention

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of existing staff across all work force groups, and/or an increase in training places – most urgently for medical physicists.’

New Zealand is training good quality Medical Physicists as fast as it can. Training takes 8-9 years using extensive amounts of New Zealand’s resources. However half of the newly qualified New Zealand Physicists in the last 10 years have gone to Australia and none of them have returned. A recent survey of newly qualified Physicists by the DHB’s was very telling: ‘100% of respondents left in this country were considering working overseas.’ The following comment is typical:

‘I moved to Australia as a personal career decision to gain expose to new working environments, technology, techniques and research. I would like to move back to NZ in the future but the pay disparity for an experienced medical physicist is too great to consider this a viable option at this stage. A 10% reduction in salary may be acceptable but 40-50% is just too great.’

The Physicists have asked only for a pay increase that will bridge half the gap between New Zealand and Australia, which will cost New Zealand less than \$450,000 in the first year.

A major role of Physicists is implementing new improved techniques in cancer treatment. Unless we can recruit and retain sufficient numbers of new physicists then new treatments will not be available to New Zealanders in the future. Our techniques will become outdated and New Zealand’s cancer cure rates will decline compared with other OECD countries. ‘Why is that reasonable in a first world country with a rock star economy?’ asked APEX advocate David Munro. ‘These physicists are striking for the benefit of future patients, we want them to receive the best quality treatment and if we don’t retain the Medical Physicists we train that isn’t going to happen.’

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Medical Physicists

Medical Physicists work in Radiation Oncology and are responsible for the delivery of radiation treatment in the correct dose to oncology patients. Radiation used in radiation therapy is powerful enough to kill cancer but conversely powerful enough to do a lot of damage to patients if delivered incorrectly. The effects of over irradiating patients can lead to burns and disfigurement, and life-threatening tissue damage, whilst under-treatment can also be fatal. It's the physicists' job to ensure that linear accelerators used in the delivery of radiation give the correct dose to millimetre accuracy. This involves extensive measurements when new equipment is put into use & regular quality assurance on all treatment devices. Physicists also assist radiation therapists & radiation oncologists in planning individual patient's treatment and checking that it is delivered correctly.
