

BARGAINING ON THE BOIL

There's a lot happening at the moment with APEX Anaesthetic Technician bargaining across the country. Let's take a look across the DHBs and see just what's going on.

THE DHBs' STANCE

Many of our sites have been negotiating for almost a year now. During bargaining the DHBs consistently told us the nurses' settlement would flow on to us. We have been patient and waited.

Unfortunately, the DHBs now tell us they can only offer a settlement based on the nurses' second offer – a total annual cost of 2.43%. This compares poorly against a nurses' deal, which included 3% pay increases and extra automatic steps, meaning most nurses would receive increases of 12% to 15.9%.

It should be noted, too, that the 2.43% offer for ATs includes the increases in on-call pay, which means the actual salary increases would be less than that.

“Promises and deadlines come, and then they go.”

We've told the DHBs this is unacceptable: our members expect the same offer as the nurses. The DHBs now repeatedly tell us they cannot agree to this, and as a result we are discussing options for industrial action.

INDUSTRIAL STRENGTH

Anaesthetic Technicians in New Zealand are in a strong position. There has been a chronic shortage of ATs for some time now due to (among other factors) poor attention to training by the DHBs.

The problem is particularly acute at the moment. A search of seek.co.nz in mid-September found 19 advertisements for ATs – with more than one employer looking to fill multiple vacancies. We have had it confirmed that there are 57 AT vacancies nationally.

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Northland DHB is 4 FTE down at the moment, and have been unable to recruit to fill these vacancies. And, as reported by [Stuff](http://Stuff.co.nz) on 14 September, Auckland DHB has 117 budgeted AT roles, 34 of which were vacant, being covered by overtime, additional shifts, or agency cover.

“There's never been this number of AT vacancies in New Zealand before.”

Meanwhile, advertisements are directly targeting UK-based practitioners, a clear sign that something is broken with the system in New Zealand.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The AT landscape is complicated by the effect of the private sector. Kensington Hospital in Northland is reportedly paying ATs \$80,000 pa as a started rate, some 15-30k above the DHB salary. Kensington also offers a 3k retention bonus for ATs. This salary and bonus scheme is a direct response to the difficulty they face in recruiting and retaining people in this specialised and critical role. Meanwhile, Southern Cross Hospital in Rotorua has just agreed to a pay increase for ATs of 6.4% for a 1-year agreement.

NURSES COVERING ATs

In some DHBs, nurses are working in AT departments as ATs, either as regular practice or to cover shortages. It's hard to see how the DHBs can agree to pay nurses around 77k (the top of their automatic steps after their new settlement kicks in) to do this job while refusing to match this rate for ATs.

STRAIGHT TALKING?

As mentioned already, APEX has been told that the government has not agreed to flow on the parameters of the nurses' settlement to other professional groups in healthcare. However, a recent communication from the PSA has claimed that their members will be getting the “same or similar” settlement to the nurses.

“The day that I heard about the communication from the PSA I was in bargaining at Lakes DHB, where I was being told there would be no flow on.”
— Luke Coxon, APEX Advocate

Precisely what “same or similar” means in reality is unclear, but the implication is that the DHBs and the government are not dealing equally and honestly with the different unions operating in the healthcare sector.

This is unacceptable. What we've been told in bargaining is quite different from the apparent reality. It's time to start taking action.

Lakes ATs have decided to take out a ballot for strike action.

WELCOME MERCY ATs!

Welcome to anaesthetic technicians at Mercy Hospital, Dunedin, most of whom have joined APEX in the last week and are getting ready to negotiate a new collective agreement.

COMPLIANCE ISSUES**Footwear for theatre**

The Health and Safety at Work Act and our collective agreements require employees be provided free of charge by their employer all protective clothing, footwear and equipment. Working in theatre we are often exposed to blood, bodily fluids, needles and other potentially dangerous bits and pieces dropping on our feet. Because of this, it is important the employer provides you with suitably protective and washable footwear at no cost to you.

On duty during meal breaks

The standard clause in collective agreements for meal breaks states that if you are unable to be relieved from the workplace for a meal break you shall be entitled to have a meal while on duty, and this period shall be regarded as working time paid at the appropriate rate. It is commonly the case that anaesthetic technicians must remain on duty during times when other staff would ordinarily be able to take unpaid meal breaks and leave hospital grounds. If this is the case for you, then your employer may owe you backpay for hours spent on duty but for which the time was treated as an unpaid agreement.

How to raise issues

If you have not been provided with footwear or are not being paid appropriately during meal breaks, raise the issue in writing with your charge tech and delegate in the first instance, and direct with us in the second by emailing at@apex.org.nz.



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Across the country

Along with the action being taken in Lakes DHB, there is also activity across the rest of the country for ATs.

NORTHLAND

In Northland we were promised an offer in line with the nurses: it hasn't come through.

“Northland DHB has cancelled 12 surgical lists due to lack of ATs in the last 2 months.”

We've deferred stop-work meetings twice already after promises from the DHB Chief Executive that we'd receive offers in accordance with the nurses', and would also deal with recruitment and retention issues. However, it was disappointing that an offer of only 2.43% came through.

The Northland stop-work meeting went ahead on Friday 14 Sep, with the decision to begin balloting for industrial action.

“Northland had to cancel four elective surgery lists to accommodate the AT stop-work meeting. Is there any clearer sign of how central ATs are to healthcare functioning?”

NELSON-MARLBOROUGH

We have a roster review process underway in Nelson-Marlborough DHB at the moment. ATs there are understaffed, and are having to work unsafe rosters. This is ongoing, and we will be back in bargaining on Oct 1.

MID-CENTRAL

We had a bargaining conference call in early September. They confirmed that they would not be matching the nurses' settlement for ATs, but they said if the parameters had shifted they would be back in touch. We have another call scheduled for Monday 17 September to confirm what's happening, and we will update you on the outcome of that meeting shortly afterwards.

CANTERBURY

We've asked for bargaining dates in Canterbury DHB, and are waiting for these to be confirmed.

HAWKE'S BAY

In HBDHB we've had two days of bargaining, and the DHB was adamant that all they could offer was the annualised cost of settlement of 2.43% we've been hearing so much about. Hawke's Bay said they would give us an offer this week: again, this hasn't come.

Regardless, the 2.43% does not meet the members' expectations. We've had a look at how we might restructure their pay scale, but we've gone back to them since we've heard about the PSA communication: we await their response.

SOUTHERN

Dunedin ATs will have a stop-work meeting on Tuesday 2 Oct at Dunedin Hospital (08:00 to 10:00), and Invercargill ATs will meet on Wednesday 26 Sep (time to be arranged).

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

With industrial action looking likely in several locations, please send notes of support and solidarity for your AT colleagues through to luke@apex.org.nz. If the ATs achieve a breakthrough, it will be better for all members across APEX.

ON THE MOVE

The bargaining landscape for ATs is changing rapidly: things are on the move. Also on the move is Luke Coxon, APEX Advocate for ATs. In the last week he's visited four DHBs to discuss their specific issues, which means that at the moment he's often not in the office. He remains available by email, however. And, as always, you can go directly to your local delegate with any questions or concerns, and your delegate will be able to get in touch with Luke if there is something urgent.