MEDIA RELEASE

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DHB's ignore crisis – ballot for strike action

Medical Physicists working for DHBs have received an offer to settle their collective agreement that goes no way towards addressing the looming recruitment and retention crisis in this workforce.

APEX advocate David Munro says medical physicists nationwide are now voting on strike action. 'It is a very disappointing position to be in. It may be that our members have to strike to ensure all Kiwis can be guaranteed best practice cancer treatment when we need it.'

The small number of 70 to 80 medical physicists in New Zealand who are crucial to offering safe and effective radiation cancer treatment are facing a crisis. 'Unless there is some move to close the 30% to 50% pay gap with Australia New Zealand's world class cancer service will be compromised because of DHB managers who have no capacity for future planning.' said Mr Munro.

This situation has been clear since June 2014 when 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 in order to keep up with the ageing population and increased cancer cases, New Zealand will need to double its training of medical physicists to six per year and, most importantly, retain them in New Zealand.

'Based on the current proportion of training output retained in the New Zealand health system…by 2022 there will be a shortfall of seven radiation oncologists, **30 medical physicists**, and 25 radiation therapists,' the report says. The report goes on to say that, 'For sustainability there will need to be improved retention of existing staff across all work force groups, and/or an increase in training places – **most urgently for medical physicists.**'

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‘The urgency of the situation for medical physicists is very clear,’ Munro says. ‘This is a small very specialised workforce with only 70 to 80 people nationwide. In that context needing 30 more physicists on top of a current 10% shortfall amounts to needing 50% more physicists by 2022.’

‘If we want to maintain our first world cancer service and stop being a school for other countries then salaries have to increase significantly. There is simply no other way to address the impending crisis,’ Munro says.

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NOTES: 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.

The Association of Professional and Executive Employees (APEX), which represents Medical Physicists says, 'if most health professionals make a mistake it normally only affects one patient. Medical Physicists commission treatment machines, so if they make a mistake all the patients treated on that machine can be mistreated for the next few years. Unless there is a sufficient number of physicists available to ensure correct calibration of these machines the results can be catastrophic'.