

11 July 2022



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An open letter (by email) to:

Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister
Hon Grant Robertson, Minister for Finance
Hon Andrew Little, Minister for Health
Hon Michael Wood, Minister for
Immigration
Hon Dr David Clark, MP for Dunedin

Hon Michael Woodhouse, MP
Ingrid Leary, MP for Taieri
Rachel Brooking, MP
Jacqui Dean, MP for Waitaki
Joseph Mooney, MP for Southland

CC regional and national media outlets

Tēnā koutou,

My name is Joanne Rowe, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Presbyterian Support Otago, a charitable organisation which provides aged residential care beds to over 500 people in our nine care homes across Otago.

I am writing to you because the aged care sector in New Zealand is in crisis.

The most critical problem, faced by all providers, is a **shortage of nurses**. As you know, this shortage is being felt across the wider health sector too. There are over 4000 registered nurses missing from New Zealand's health workforce, in the wider context of a global shortage of nurses.

New Zealand is fighting for nursing staff in a competitive environment and is not a country of first choice right now for overseas nurses. This is a direct result of current immigration settings, which require them to come here on a 2-year visa, rather than be granted immediate residency.

Over 1000 aged care beds in New Zealand have closed due to a lack of nurses. More beds will close if no new nurses are added to the workforce.

Residency must be offered to overseas trained and qualified nurses. New Zealand must make the immigration process for nurses as easy and quick as possible.

Action is needed now.

Nurses who have remained in the aged care sector are now under unsustainable strain, as they struggle to cover shifts and to provide quality health care to vulnerable older people.

The nurse shortage means that our sector will remain in crisis until a solution is put in place.

As a charitable organisation, we face **an additional and critical challenge**. Unlike the big corporate providers, we cannot top up the wages of our nurses to bring their salaries into line with their DHB counterparts.

A nurse is a nurse, and **we call for pay parity as a matter of urgency**, so that we (and other providers like us) can retain our dedicated and experienced aged care nurses.

I draw your attention to these key facts (from the NZ Aged Care Association - Aged Residential Care Industry Profile 2021-22 <https://nzaca.org.nz/advocacy-and-policy/arc-industry-profile-2021-22/>)

- There are 40,941 aged residential care beds in New Zealand. There were 35,254 residents at ARC facilities on 30 September 2021, 57 percent of whom are at one of the higher care levels (hospital, dementia, or psychogeriatric).
- **Forty seven percent of the total beds are supplied by charitable, minor and individual providers**, which equates to 19,250 beds.
- Turnover of registered nurses (RNs) over the year to December 2021 is 48 percent, up from 33 percent in December 2019.
- The percentage of RNs on a visa is 43 percent, while around one third of the caregiver workforce (made up of healthcare assistants, activities coordinators and diversional therapists) is on a visa.
- The Philippines (39 percent of RNs) and India (37 percent of RNs) are the main countries of origin for ARC workers on visas.

Finally, I want to share this important, personal story with you. One of our most senior nurses has written about the reality of what it means to be a dedicated, over-stretched health professional working in aged care in New Zealand today. I urge you to read it because it tells a story that the facts and figures alone cannot tell.

“I am extremely tired. I am physically drained and emotionally spent. I am at burn out. I continue because to stop would place extra strain on an already broken system. I fear that if I do stop, it will be very hard to start again.

I have two young children who need me as their mum, and I need to spend time with them. How can I make them understand that I care both for them and our residents and make them understand why I am working so much?

I have a wonderful husband but how can I expect him to know how I see my responsibilities at work and why I need to work so much? We have little time for ourselves, and the children and I rely on him so much to do things at home when he also works so hard at his job. How do we make our extremely tight budget stretch to cover the most basic needs?

How do we expect families of our residents to understand that we are trying as hard as we can to love and support their loved ones when we are working with severely restricted staff cover and experience? How can we expect the families to know what it is like when I am working double shifts with only limited sleep between and why at times, we may not be available on a 24/7 basis?

Our staff work extremely hard and cover gaps as best they can by working extra shifts. Not so much because they love their work but more so just to pay the bills. Do people really understand the cost of living, with rent being so high in most areas of New Zealand?

Do people understand that an Aged Care Registered Nurse receives approximately \$20,000 less than a DHB Registered Nurse?

Do people understand that our aged care sector regularly sees staff moving to a DHB, moving overseas, or leaving work altogether?

When the Health Minister was asked about the mental health of staff in the nursing sector, his response that this was an issue for “management”, just highlights how mis-understood we feel.

I live in fear each day that something will go wrong. I fear that one of us will make an error, not based on the lack of care and attention but because we are working past our limits.

We tend to use Covid as the reason for many of our challenges in our sector, but I believe this is just an excuse for an already broken and failing system. I fear that things are only going to get worse. We live every day in hope but quite frankly see little light at the end of the tunnel.

We accept thanks humbly, and the kind thoughts and smiles, but that doesn't make up for lost time with family, the mental and physical health problems, and the emotional and financial strain. Yet we box on day after day, living in hope that someone will see how hard it is.

Many of us see what we do as a career, we want to make a difference especially for people who are in health need or moving towards the end of their lives. What we are experiencing makes some of us question the merit of taking that career path.”

We call on the government to take immediate action by:

1. **Altering immigration settings** to grant immediate residency to overseas qualified nurses wishing to work in New Zealand.
2. **Increasing funding** so that pay parity can be achieved for nurses in the aged care sector.

Without these steps, more aged care beds will close, placing pressure on the hospital system and on thousands more older people, their families and communities throughout New Zealand.

Nāku noa, nā



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