



the peak body and leading voice
for sonographers

Workforce shortage Australia – FAQs

Why is there a shortage of sonographers?

Medical diagnostic ultrasound is used to diagnose a variety of medical conditions. Across Australian and New Zealand sonographers perform the majority of medical diagnostic ultrasound examinations.

The need for medical diagnostic ultrasound is increasing exponentially. However, the number of new sonographers coming into the workforce has not kept up with demand. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that more than 40% of sonographers work in part-time roles with limited capacity to take on additional work, and one-quarter of the workforce is over 50 years of age and approaching retirement.

For over a decade, this workforce shortage has been worsening and is now critical.

The lack of clinical training placements is the most significant barrier to overcoming the shortage. To graduate, student sonographers must complete 2,200 hours of clinical training. Most courses require students to identify their placement, commonly provided as an 'employed' position. These positions can be challenging to secure as they rely heavily on the time and resources of supervising sonographer, and present a high financial cost to the employer.

Is Australia the only country with a shortage?

No. The shortage of sonographers is a global issue.

Many countries are facing a similar problem, including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

How significant is the workforce shortage in Australia?

In the ten years to 2018, the sonographer workforce grew by an average of 5% per annum, and in recent years this has slowed to just over 2%. In January 2020, there were 6,536 Accredited Medical Sonographers in Australia.¹

During the same period, the demand for Medicare-funded ultrasound services grew at an average of 7% per annum², with sonographers responsible for providing more than 85% of these services.

To have kept up with growth in service delivery, the industry would have needed to qualify or accredit at least 30% more sonographers each year. The ASA estimates that in 2019 there was a shortfall of at least 3,000 sonographers. Left unresolved, the shortage is expected to become exponentially worse, as generations of sonographers begin to retire.

¹ ASAR reported data. February 2020

² Medicare Australia Statistics <http://medicarestatistics.humanservices.gov.au>



Is the shortage worse in some areas?

The workforce shortage is an issue across Australia.

It is a particular challenge for many regional and remote communities. Similarly, sonography positions that require discipline-specific skills or additional experience can be challenging to fill.

While it is undoubtedly a challenge for the private sector, where 70% of sonographers are employed, the public sector also faces challenges in attracting and retaining sufficient sonographers.

What are the risks associated with the shortage?

A shortage of sonographers directly affects patient access to timely, quality and comprehensive medical diagnostic ultrasound services.

Patients need access to ultrasound for a range of health services, including pregnancy management, cancer diagnoses, and everything in between. Ultrasound is often a patient's first diagnostic imaging exam, which either eliminates the need for or informs the use of, other more expensive diagnostic imaging.

Delays in accessing ultrasound services can result in avoidable and poor (sometimes catastrophic) health outcomes for the patient and can result in increased costs for the patient and the health system due to having to treat more advanced health conditions.

What is the ASA doing to help address this problem?

The workforce shortage is a critical issue for ASA members and the wider industry. Work to address the problem is a major priority for the ASA.

The ASA is working with key stakeholders – employers, educators and governments - to fully understand the complexity of the challenge and consider a range of solutions.

Importantly, the ASA continues to advocate Federal and State governments and health departments on behalf of members to seek support for solutions.

What solutions are being considered to address workforce shortage?

There is a range of possible solutions being considered. Efforts are focused on solutions that seek to overcome the lack of clinical training placements, as this is currently the most significant barrier.

In its 2020–21 Federal Budget Submission, the ASA put forward several solutions which drew off consultations with employers. These include:

Trialling new sonographer clinical training solutions; including providing intensive simulated clinical training to student sonographers in the first few months of education aimed at increasing student productivity and reducing the impact on supervisor productivity.

A sonographer bonding incentive scheme for rural and remote areas; providing funding to encourage workplaces to offer clinical training placements and help qualifying sonographers to remain in these areas.

Wage assistance for private practice sonographer clinical supervisors; to offset some of the cost to business of employing a student and lost revenue associated with the supervisor's reduced productivity.



The ASA has also spoken with state governments to seek support to increase local clinical training placements through an enhanced sonographer clinical supervisor role.

Is it possible to attract sonographers from overseas?

While a proportion of sonographers working in Australia have been trained overseas, attracting and retaining internationally trained sonographers as a primary solution to the workforce shortage is not viable.

Net migration for medical imaging professionals is very low and is a minor source of new sonographers to the workforce³. In the five years to 2018, a total of 140 overseas trained sonographers were approved to practice in Australia. The low net migration is influenced by the fact that the minimum competency expectations of sonographers in Australia are higher than for many other countries. There is also a global shortage of sonographers, which limits the ability to attract overseas trained sonographers to address the local workforce shortage.

³ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. ANZSCO 2512-14 Sonographer – NSW. Occupational report. Australian Government. 30 Sep 2019.