



the peak body and leading voice  
for sonographers

## Workforce shortage New Zealand – FAQs

### Why is there a shortage of sonographers?

Medical diagnostic ultrasound is used to diagnose a variety of medical conditions. Across 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.

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.

In recent years the situation has become more dire as there is now only one university in New Zealand, Auckland University, providing education to train new general sonographers. Currently, there is no educational pathway in New Zealand to become a cardiac sonographer.

This has been the case since the ASUM Diploma of Medical Ultrasound (DMU), which traditionally accounted for more than half of all New Zealand graduates, ceased in early 2019.

### Is New Zealand the only country with a shortage?

No. The shortage of sonographers is a global issue.

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

### How significant is the workforce shortage in New Zealand?

For several years the shortage of sonographers in New Zealand has been considered severe. The workforce shortage of sonographers is a problem for health services nation-wide, and an issue which is exaggerated in regional and remote districts.

Sonography positions that require discipline-specific skills or additional experience can be challenging to fill, such as cardiac sonographers.

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

Across recent years isolated initiatives have sought to address this issue locally. However, with declining locally trained sonographers, the workforce is at dire risk. Now only one university in New Zealand provides education to train new general sonographers, and there is no educational pathway in New Zealand to become a cardiac sonographer.



### **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?**

To date, the ASA has met with the Ministry of Health including the new Chief Allied Health Professions Officer, regional alliance and Technical Advisory Service representatives, local universities and national educators, District Health Boards' representatives, unions and the Medical Radiation Technologists Board (MRTB). These discussions have been around the workforce shortage as well as the lack of courses in New Zealand and on how we can solve these issues.

While these discussions continue, Auckland University is investigating its capacity in its ability to increase the number of students it can enrol in its course. The ASA is working closely with Auckland University to assist them in their endeavour to increase their capacity to support sonographer education and gather learnings from Australian universities.

The ASA will continue to work with all of these key stakeholders, particularly with the government to look at new innovative solutions to sustain the workforce into the future, in both a public and private health setting.

### **Is it possible to attract sonographers from overseas?**

Immigration New Zealand has been working on a skills market attraction program since 2017 to bring overseas trained sonographers to the country.<sup>1</sup> Between 2017 and 2019 the number of new sonographers with overseas qualifications exceed the number of new sonographers qualified in New Zealand.<sup>2, 3</sup>

However, the numbers of sonographers coming into New Zealand are not meeting the national workforce supply-demand, and there continues to be a critical shortage across the country.

This in part has to do with the global shortage of sonographers, which limits the ability to attract overseas trained sonographers to address the local workforce shortage—compounded by the reducing number of sonographers trained locally.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sonographer Workforce Development Programme Update. Issue 3.* New Zealand Government. June 2017

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Report 2018.* New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board. 2018

<sup>3</sup> *Annual Report 2019.* New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board. 2019