



Workforce shortage New Zealand – FAQs

Why is there a shortage of sonographers?

Medical diagnostic ultrasound is used to diagnose and manage 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, and one-quarter of the workforce is over 50 years of age and approaching retirement.

The lack of clinical training placements is a significant barrier to overcoming the shortage. To graduate, student sonographers must complete a comprehensive clinical training program. Students are typically required to identify their own 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 sonographers, and present a high financial cost to the employer.

The shortage is also influenced by the lack of domestic training opportunities, with a high reliance on attracting overseas trained sonographers to fill the gaps. There is currently only one university in New Zealand, Auckland University, providing education to train new general sonographers. Auckland University also introduced a cardiac sonography course in February 2024.

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.

In 2023, the New Zealand Government estimated that there is a shortage of 120+ FTE sonographers or approximately 20% of the current workforce.

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 limited locally trained sonographers, the workforce is at dire risk with only one university in New Zealand providing education to train new general 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. For instance, patients are regularly having to wait a year and a half for ultrasound heart scans.

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.

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.¹ In recent years, the number of new sonographers with overseas qualifications has regularly exceeded the number of new sonographers qualified in New Zealand.²

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 limited number of sonographers trained locally.

¹ *Sonographer Workforce Development Programme Update. Issue 3.* New Zealand Government. June 2017

² *Annual Report 2022.* New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board. 2022