



a healthier world through
sonographer expertise

Tuesday, 14 March 2023

Women's Health Strategy
Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health
133 Molesworth Street
Thorndon 6012
Wellington

Submitted via email strategies@health.govt.nz

Dear Sir/Madam,

Women's Health Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on the Women's Health Strategy.

The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) is the professional organisation for Australasian sonographers, who are the experts in ultrasound. With over 7,000 members, and representing more than 70% of Australasia's sonographers, the ASA's purpose is to foster a sonography profession that delivers high quality ultrasound with a vision to create a healthier world through sonographer expertise.

Sonographers are highly skilled health professionals who are strategically involved at the initial diagnostic stages of patient care and perform the majority of comprehensive medical diagnostic ultrasound examinations including breast, gynaecological and obstetric scans.

The ASA would be pleased to be involved in further discussions as the Women's Health Strategy develops.

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Slade Carter, General Manager, Policy and Advocacy, at policy@sonographers.org or (03) 9552 0000.

Yours sincerely,

Jodie Long

Chief Executive Officer
Australasian Sonographers Association



Women's Health Strategy: Australasian Sonographers Association Feedback

The ASA commends Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health for initiating the first Women's Health Strategy for Aotearoa New Zealand. The Strategy represents an opportunity to create an important framework for planning and delivering improvements to women's health and wellbeing.

The role of sonographers in women's health

As experts in diagnostic ultrasound examinations, sonographers play a key role in the detection, diagnosis and management of issues affecting women throughout their lives, including sexual, reproductive, breast and pregnancy health. A Women's Health Strategy must acknowledge the critical part of sonographers in women's health, in particular throughout the pregnancy journey. Timely, affordable, and equitable access to sonography services is fundamental to women's health and wellbeing.

In addition to health issues that directly affect women, sonographers also play a vital role in supporting women's health more broadly, by undertaking a wide variety of general, cardiac, vascular and musculoskeletal examinations.

In December 2022, there were 704 accredited sonographers in New Zealand,¹ which equates to around 13 per 100,000 population.² According to the New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board approximately 8 per cent of these sonographers identify as being Māori or Pacific Islander.³

Key women's health issues and sonography

A number of issues relate directly to women utilising ultrasound services, including:

- Obstetric and reproductive health:
 - Managing foetal development and growth
 - Managing maternal health for delivery options, placental position, diabetes, previous foetal or delivery complications
 - IVF programme for follicle tracking.
- Breast issues:
 - Presence of lumps
 - Family history of breast cancer
 - Working alongside mammography to assist with biopsies and surgical interventions.
- Gynaecology - pelvic scans for:
 - Diagnosis of endometrial or ovarian cancers
 - Confirmation of placement of IUCD
 - Diagnostic workup for pelvic pain and endometriosis
 - Urinary and faecal incontinence.

¹ New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board, Accredited Medical Sonographers for the year ending December 2022

² Statistics New Zealand, Estimated Resident Population. Available at: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/topics/population>

³ New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board, Annual Report 2022. Available at: <https://www.mrtboard.org.nz/about-us/annual-reports/>



Access to ultrasound services provided by professional qualified sonographers on specialist medical equipment, regardless of where they live, help women lead healthy, productive lives.

Ultrasound services can make a difference to addressing these issues by giving valuable diagnostic information to referrers in a timely, cost-effective manner that enables early intervention when required, and reduce the long-term burden on the public health system.

The shortage of sonographers a cause for concern

In New Zealand, there is a severe shortage of sonographers with generalist and specialist skills, including cardiac sonographers. This shortage is nationwide, irrespective of geographic location.

The most significant barrier to addressing this shortage is the poor availability of sonographer clinical training placements. These placements are required for sonographers to become fully qualified and permitted to practise unsupervised. However, placements require significant investment of expertise, time, and material resources by supervisors and employers.

The shortage is further exacerbated, as Auckland University is the only university providing a course to train new general sonographers, the Postgraduate Diploma in Health Sciences in Ultrasound. Unlike undergraduate degree health student placements, sonography placements are paid positions, placing a financial strain on employers, who must provide a suitable supervisor to ensure the fulfilment of the requisite training hours, a lengthy period of 2,000 hours. Auckland University states that: "By completion of the training period the requirement is that the student has experienced a minimum of 2000 clinical hours. Additionally, the minimum total number of Ultrasound examinations to be recorded is 2000, of which no fewer than 1000 must be performed without assistance."⁴

Currently, there is no educational pathway in New Zealand to become a cardiac sonographer, leaving a crucial gap in this specialist workforce. This has been the case since the Australasian Society for Ultrasound in Medicine (ASUM) Diploma of Medical Ultrasound (DMU), which traditionally accounted for more than half of all New Zealand graduates and ceased in early 2019.

As a result of the small number of locally trained sonographers, New Zealand is becoming increasingly dependent on overseas-trained sonographers. Over the past five years, only 37% of new sonographer registrations approved were New Zealand trained⁵. This is a risky strategy and is unsustainable in the long term.

Opportunities to address workforce issues for improved access to comprehensive ultrasounds

1. To reduce the reliance on overseas-trained sonographers, New Zealand should increase its locally educated workforce. Solutions include increasing the enrolment capacity at Auckland University or establishing a second course at another institution to increase numbers of sonography graduates. Furthermore, the only current path available for sonographers is a postgraduate degree course - consideration should also be given to other study options, such as a direct entry course.

Consideration should be given to establishing an educational pathway in cardiac sonography to address this specialist gap.

2. To address the issue of placements, the New Zealand government should provide support for initiatives to assist both private and public health services across the country to improve the availability

⁴ University of Auckland (2022) Medical Imaging Postgraduate Handbook 2022. Available at: <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/auckland/fmhs/study-with-us/docs/2022/medical-imaging-pghandbook-2022.pdf>

⁵ New Zealand Medical Radiation Technologists Board, Annual Reports 2018 - 2022. Available at: <https://www.mrtboard.org.nz/about-us/annual-reports/>

of placements. This might include incentivisation measures, such as a Practice Incentive Program, to help ensure the viability of sites that are providing student placements.

Without change, access to sonographer expertise will become increasingly scarce in New Zealand.

Areas that need improvement

Access to ultrasound services needs improvement in a number of areas.

Maternity ultrasound needs special attention to ensure that women across New Zealand, regardless of where they and their ethnicity, have timely access to ultrasound services during pregnancy. It is encouraging that the Maternity Ultrasound Advisory Group has been reconvened to provide advice to the Ministry of Health to ensure that all pregnant women have equitable access to high quality, clinically appropriate maternity ultrasound services.⁶ The ASA awaits recommendations from the Advisory Group with interest, including recommendations on investment requirements.

In particular, there are noted differences in accessing services between Māori and Pacific Island women when compared to groups of other ethnicities. For instance, one study noted that Women of New Zealand European ethnicity were more likely to register their pregnancy with a health service before 10 weeks' gestation compared to women of Māori or Pacific ethnicity.⁷ Issues of cultural safety and awareness, health education and availability of services across New Zealand should be taken into account for improvements to be made.

Issues of urinary incontinence is under-reported and increasing among women, with available services well below the numbers required to provide a level of best practice.⁸ It is predicted that the post-menopausal group of women in the baby boomer generation will place a heavy demand on health resources going forward due to health issues related to incontinence. Funding to enable sonographers to be specifically trained in this area, alongside robust clinical pathways from GPs to pelvic floor imaging sonographers working in conjunction with physiotherapists and specialists, could improve health outcomes for women.

Inequality of access due to location can prevent women from obtaining a timely ultrasound scan, treatment or further imaging. This can impact on issues faced at different life stages, such as puberty and menopause. Certain conditions, such as endometriosis, need to be identified earlier where possible, often through a combination of ultrasound and endoscopy.

Barriers to high quality sonography services

Barriers to universally high-quality sonography services include funding, skills, communication, health literacy, and awareness of what sonographers can offer to colleagues in other medical professions.

For women accessing ultrasound, barriers can include:

- Financial ability to pay for a scan, and even for petrol to reach an appointment

⁶ Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand. The Maternity Action Plan. Available at: <https://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/whats-happening/work-underway/maternity/the-maternity-action-plan>

⁷ Dixon, L. et al. (2014) Changing trends in pregnancy registration for New Zealand women. J PRIM HEALTH CARE, 6(4):279–285. Available at: <https://www.publish.csiro.au/hc/pdf/HC14279>

⁸ Esplin, J., Smith, J., Doust, E., Poynton, M. (2017) Report on Good Practice of Continence Services in New Zealand. Wellington, Sapere Research Group. Available at: <https://srgexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Continence-best-practice-report-March-2017.pdf>

- Needing to travel long distances for specialist services
- Taking time off work for an ultrasound
- Childcare during an appointment time (where the woman is the primary carer)
- Availability of appointments/out-of-hours appointment times
- Poor health literacy among some patients, and the inability to advocate for themselves because of this.

Possible solutions to improve access to ultrasound

- Funding for women to enable them to attend private ultrasound appointments
- Training more sonographers, with a view to increasing the available appointments for ultrasound scans
- Enhanced communication measures between clinics to ensure no double-ups of scans, particularly obstetric work
- Establish public hospital satellite ultrasound services, particularly for obstetric ultrasound, in order to improve access for those in rural locations.