



a healthier world through  
sonographer expertise

Monday, 23 January 2023

Committee Secretariat  
Finance and Expenditure Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington

*Submitted online only.*

## **Submission to the Finance and Expenditure Committee: Budget Policy Statement (Budget 2023)**

The Australasian Sonographers Association thanks the Finance and Expenditure Committee for the opportunity to respond to the Budget Policy Statement released on 14 December 2022.

### About the Australasian Sonographers Association

The Australasian Sonographers Association (ASA) is the professional organisation for sonographers who provide the majority of medical diagnostic ultrasound examinations across New Zealand and Australia.

With over 7,000 members and a membership of more than 70% of Australasia's sonographers, the ASA has a significant role in supporting and advising the profession on the highest standards to provide the best possible outcomes in ultrasound for patients.

### **Feedback on the Budget Policy Statement**

The ASA recognises the 2022 Budget Policy Statement (BPS)<sup>1</sup> continues proposed investment against the five wellbeing priorities (Just Transition, Physical and Mental Wellbeing, Future of Work, Māori and Pacific, and Child Wellbeing).

In delivering the goals of the BPS, the ASA requests that the Government invest in programs that address critical issues of timely access to sonographers, as part of its broader health strategy. As health professionals with responsibility for diagnostic ultrasound, sonographers are on the front line of detection and secondary prevention. Indeed, the BPS notes that “investing in a healthier population now reduces health costs in the future.”<sup>2</sup> The value of a sustainable sonographer workforce is therefore critical to the Government Wellbeing priorities of Physical and Mental Health and the Future of Work.

The ASA has outlined recommendations for ensuring a more sustainable sonographer workforce, to help improve access to critical ultrasound services for those who need it.

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<sup>1</sup> 2022 Budget Policy Statement (Budget 2023). New Zealand Government. 14 Dec 2022

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Page 16.

## 1. Sonographer workforce shortage

Ultrasound is often a patient's first diagnostic imaging exam, either eliminating the need for or informing the use of other more expensive diagnostic imaging. For instance, CT examinations are on average twice as expensive as ultrasound, and MRI is three-four times more costly.

Patients need timely access to comprehensive medical diagnostic ultrasound for a range of health services, including pregnancy, diagnosing cancers and a host of other conditions and concerns. The highly skilled sonographer profession provides the majority of the comprehensive diagnostic ultrasound services across New Zealand.

There has been a national workforce shortage of sonographers for over a decade. The profession remains stuck on the New Zealand Government's long-term skills shortage list.<sup>3</sup> That shortage has grown over time and impacts on communities' timely access to services.<sup>4, 5</sup>

The supply of sonographers is not keeping up with the demand for ultrasound services, which is increasing in both volume and complexity.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, 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.

The shortage is further exacerbated in New Zealand, as Auckland University is the only university providing a course to train new general sonographers. 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, 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. This is a risky strategy and is unsustainable in the long term.

Bolstering the number of locally trained sonographers will provide more opportunities for innovative public health programs to ensure sonographers can serve communities where they are most needed. For instance, sonographers could be included more frequently as members of mobile multidisciplinary teams that visit rural districts to help identify health issues earlier, thereby improving health outcomes over the longer term.

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<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Immigration: Skill shortage list checker, sonographer  
<https://skillshortages.immigration.govt.nz/sonographer/>. Accessed January 2023

<sup>4</sup> Workforce shortage New Zealand. Australasian Sonographers Association website. Accessed January 2023  
[www.sonographers.org/advocacy/workforce-nz](http://www.sonographers.org/advocacy/workforce-nz)

<sup>5</sup> Buckley B, Farnworth MJ, Whalley G. Echocardiography service provision in New Zealand: capacity modelling the cardiac sonographer workforce. *New Zealand Medical Journal*. 2016 Jan 8; 129(1428): 16-24

<sup>6</sup> Strategic Workforce Services. DHB Sonographer Workforce Assessment Report. Central Region's Technical Advisory Services. March 2016

The ASA was pleased to be invited to join a new Ministry of Health led group, the Sonography Sector Reference Group, which is being established in 2023, and which will consider the full benefit of the sonography profession to achieve the concept of Pae ora. The ASA believes that the true attainment of healthy futures requires investment.

**Possible solutions to the workforce shortages include:**

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 of placements. This might include incentivisation measures, such as a Practice Incentive Programs to support medical imaging sites to become training centres, and to help ensure the viability of sites that are providing student placements.

**The ASA strongly recommends:**

- **Addressing the critical sonographer workforce shortage as one of the priorities of Health New Zealand and the Ministry of Health; and**
- **The Budget 2023 support increased local sonographer education and clinical placements.**

**2. Increase health workforce data accuracy and completeness**

In recent years, government data about the sonographer workforce has relied on information (for instance, service reported FTE and vacancy rates) from the former DHBs and other government services, or commissioned research, which has relied mainly on the same data sources. With 70% of the sonographer workforce employed in non-government businesses,<sup>7</sup> this data does not provide a complete picture of the sonographer workforce or national/local service demand.

Demand for sonographer medical diagnostic ultrasound examinations has progressively increased in volume and complexity over the last few decades. As this growth is expected to continue, it will be increasingly crucial for the Government to have high-quality sonographer workforce data to inform future policy and expenditure supporting equitable access to medical diagnostic ultrasound.

The ASA believes that the nationally centralised planning and data collection can support significant New Zealand health system improvements. Such as improved coordination of strategies to reduce the

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<sup>7</sup> Survey Matters. 2021 Sonographer Employment and Salary Survey. Australian and New Zealand data. Australasian Sonographers Association. Nov 2021.

national workforce shortage of sonographers. However, it is critical that the data collection includes information from the private sector, given its significance in the delivery of ultrasound services.

**The ASA recommends:**

- **The Government prioritise the establishment of whole-of-health-system data collection for sonographers and other allied health profession workforce that includes both the public and the private sectors; and**
- **In the interest of transparency, the data is available publicly or on request.**

### **3. Mutual recognition of Australian trained sonographers for work in New Zealand**

The BPS notes the importance of immigration to help fill workforce shortages: “The Government has responded to the concerns of businesses by making changes to our immigration settings to ease workforce pressures in the most affected sectors.”<sup>8</sup> This is particularly relevant to the sonographer workforce, where the Government has significantly targeted sonographer workforce migration from countries such as the UK and Canada.

However, the poor recognition of Australian sonographers for registration and practice in New Zealand continues to be a missed opportunity.

Despite an Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO 251214) for 'sonographer' in place, Australian trained sonographers interested in working in New Zealand must complete the standard overseas-trained applicant process.<sup>9</sup>

The Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement<sup>10</sup> can allow the Government to streamline recognition of Australian trained sonographers to register and practice in New Zealand. Simplifying these processes is an easy step toward resolving the critical sonographer workforce shortage by increasing national access to the 7,408 qualified sonographers in Australia.<sup>11</sup>

**The ASA recommends:**

- **Improved recognition of the equivalency of Australian sonographers for registration and practice in New Zealand**

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<sup>8</sup> Budget Policy Statement, op cit. Page 11.

<sup>9</sup> Overseas Trained - How to Register. New Zealand Medical Radiation Practice Board website. Accessed January 2023 [www.mrtboard.org.nz/pre-registration/overseas-trained-how-to-register](http://www.mrtboard.org.nz/pre-registration/overseas-trained-how-to-register)

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment. Trans-Tasman Mutual Recognition Arrangement. Accessed January 2023. [www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/business/trade-and-tariffs/trade-agreements-and-partnerships/closer-economic-relations-with-australia-and-the-trans-tasman-mutual-recognition-arrangement/](http://www.mbie.govt.nz/business-and-employment/business/trade-and-tariffs/trade-agreements-and-partnerships/closer-economic-relations-with-australia-and-the-trans-tasman-mutual-recognition-arrangement/)

<sup>11</sup> Accredited Medical Sonographers. Australian Sonographer Accreditation Registry. 31 December 2022



Thank you again for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Budget Policy Statement (Budget 2023). If you wish to talk to us about these recommendations or require additional information, don't hesitate to contact the ASA General Manager, Policy and Advocacy, Slade Carter, by phone at +61 3 9552 0000 or email to [policy@sonographers.org](mailto:policy@sonographers.org).

We look forward to working with members of parliament and officials to ensure our communities have timely access to high quality medical diagnostic ultrasound.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Jodie Long'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.

**Jodie Long**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Australasian Sonographers Association