New Zealand hospitals in crisis amid surging winter illnesses

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Nurses at New Zealand's North Shore Hospital in Auckland last month declared a "state of emergency," saying chronic understaffing and severe overcrowding are putting patients at risk.

About 120 nurses, healthcare assistants and other staff signed a letter, which was sent by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) to Health NZ chief executive Dale Bramley declaring they could "no longer remain silent" about the appalling conditions. It explained that the Emergency Department (ED) is staffed for 40 patients but is operating at twice that, while running at 200 to 300 percent over capacity at critical times. Patients are left sitting in their own waste and being treated in corridors.

"We will not accept the normalisation of preventable harm or the continued degradation of our public health system," the letter said. The NZNO, however, has not announced any industrial action.

A surge of Influenza A is hitting New Zealand, with Auckland recording its worst week for flu-related hospitalisations in a decade. Radio NZ (RNZ) reported on August 14 that hospital admissions in the city doubled in the space of a week, rising to 3.781 cases per 100,000 people from 1.574 the week before.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker told *Stuff* on August 25 it was difficult to properly monitor influenza and winter illnesses because quality surveillance programs were discontinued, including the Ministry of Health not renewing its contract for the FluTracking tool due to cost-cutting.

Starship Children's Hospital is deferring less urgent cases to cope with a "flood" of very young children with flu symptoms. The St John Ambulance Service reported that in August it had its highest volume of emergency calls on record, with 2,562 in a single day, many of them for respiratory illnesses.

The North Shore Hospital staff letter said Health NZ had failed to plan properly for winter and had not hired the nursing numbers it had agreed to. It described patients taking 90 minutes to be triaged with some waiting more than 50 hours in ED to be admitted to hospital. Some missed essential medication while others had urgent heart scans delayed for hours. Charge nurse Jean Classey told RNZ: "It's an absolute nightmare. It feels like we're at war."

Health Minister Simeon Brown has flatly rejected all the evidence, maintaining there is no crisis. In a statement, he falsely claimed the health system is improving: "More people are being treated, wait times for surgery are shorter, and patients are waiting less time in emergency departments," he boasted.

Brown's claims fly in the face of reality. One patient, Kit Slade, told the *New Zealand Herald* she had waited 10 hours for a bed at the "incredibly under-resourced" Wellington Hospital. The conditions in the waiting room were "alarming" with people having their vital signs checked from nurses while lying on the floor or clutching buckets for nausea. After midnight a doctor announced the ED was at "200 percent capacity" with every bed taken.

Palmerston North Hospital doctor Dusty Bratton told RNZ on August 14 he had personally begged Health NZ to "send help" after one extraordinarily busy day. When he arrived at the ED in the morning, he found 20 patients with nowhere for them to be examined. One patient waited 27 hours.

Staff were regularly picking up extra shifts but that was unsustainable, Bratton said. He added that there was pressure to reach discharge targets and make numbers look better on paper, resulting in decisions that were not in patients' best interests.

Public hospitals have for years been over-run due to chronic shortages of doctors and exorbitant costs of GP visits. Wellington Hospital's ED went into its most critical code-red status on average twice a day between

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January and October 2025, as demand repeatedly outstripped available staff and beds. More than 3,200 patients, around 10 a day, left the department without being treated.

In June, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that a man, Brent Horsburgh, was found dead in Waikato Hospital's ED waiting room toilet after waiting for nine hours. The death is still being investigated by Health NZ.

Understaffing is not limited to EDs. The *Post* reported on August 24 that Wellington Hospital's ophthalmology service was "overwhelmed," with nursing vacancies unfilled. More than 800 patients are overdue for follow-up appointments, and the backlog has raised concerns about whether people are risking a deterioration in their eyesight.

The crisis has been worsening under austerity measures imposed by successive governments, including the last Labour Party government and the current National Party-NZ First-ACT Party coalition.

Last month it was revealed that more than 1,300 nursing positions remained vacant nationwide with full-time nursing roles increasing by just 54 between March 2024 and 2026. Only 47 percent of graduating trainee nurses (about 800) secured jobs at the end of 2025. Many are being forced to look for work overseas.

Last December, Brown ordered health services to find more than $NZ500 million in "efficiencies," on top of an existing $2 billion annual cost-saving target. Documents released last week showed health leaders warned Brown that strict "recruitment controls" were required to rein in spending. While Health NZ has denied a "hiring freeze," more than 2,000 jobs in the health sector have been shed amid a wholesale government attack on public services.

The government's 2025–26 budget allocated $NZ13 billion for the military over four years, but health increased by just 4.77 percent ($1.37 billion) amid high inflation—insufficient to address the crisis of unmet need. According to documents cited by the *Post* on August 25, a "headline" $96 million annual boost to GP practices, previously announced by Brown, is being funded by equivalent funding cuts for hospital and specialist services.

The government is exploiting the crisis of its own making to outsource thousands of operations to private hospitals. Health NZ recently announced $300 million in long-term contracts with private hospitals to treat backlogs of orthopaedic patients. Boosting the private sector further entrenches the two-tier health system and serves as a wedge for a program of wholesale privatisation.

While the NZNO organises workers to write toothless protest letters, the unions themselves have abetted the government's attacks. The NZNO pushed through sellout contract agreements in 2018 and 2021, under the Labour government, after isolating and shutting down powerful nurses' strikes.

Thousands of nurses, doctors, ambulance personnel and lab technicians have repeatedly taken industrial action over low pay, understaffing and deplorable conditions for both staff and patients but their struggles have repeatedly been betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy. Following a mass strike by more than 100,000 healthcare workers and teachers on October 23 last year, the Public Service Association, NZNO and Association of Salaried Medical Specialists all imposed agreements that slashed real wages and did nothing to address the staffing crisis.

With a general election looming on November 7, the major capitalist parties are competing over who will impose the most brutal attacks on working people and the services they depend on.

The National Party last week unveiled its election slogan: "No New Taxes," foreshadowing a scorched earth assault on public services. It committed to three so-called Budget Responsibility Rules**,** prioritising a return to surplus in 2028/29, reducing debt to below 40 percent of GDP and permanently cutting crown expenditure to 30 percent of GDP.

Labour's fiscal strategy also promises to slash debt and return to surplus by 2029/30. Leader Chris Hipkins said his party would "get the books back into shape" but would not do it by "making life harder" and cutting services. This is a fraud: the ruling class is demanding intensified attacks on the working class, and the funneling of billions of dollars into the military to prepare for war.

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