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GPs dismayed at Te Whatu Ora claims on the future of primary care

General practitioners are dismayed at claims by Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora that half of GPs' work could be done by teleconsultation.

General Practice Owners Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (GenPro) Chair Dr Angus Chambers believes Te Whatu Ora is pursuing a deliberate policy of reimaging primary care in a way that minimises the role of GPs.

"Te Whatu Ora's view that general practice is 'not fit for purpose' is becoming more apparent. Many of our communities are about to lose family doctor services, and increasingly the future of primary care seems to be missing a key component – the GP. I wonder if anyone has asked patients if they are happy about not having a GP involved in their care," said Dr Chambers.

Dr Chambers' comments come after Whatu Ora Living Well Director Martin Hefford claimed in a webinar this week that an estimated 40 to 50 percent of general practice work could be done by teleconsultation.

Said Dr Chambers: "In making that statement it is clear that Mr Hefford has limited understanding of what happens in a face-to-face general practice consultation."

"This is yet another example of Te Whatu Ora misunderstanding and undervaluing GPs' work. Mr Hefford also claimed that 20 percent of general practice work could be undertaken by physiotherapists. This is just ludicrous and assumes that the diagnosis has somehow been achieved without a GP," said Dr Chambers.

GenPro believes these comments are an attempt by Te Whatu Ora to mask its underinvestment in primary care, recruiting more staff and using modes of interaction that, while possibly a solution for demand spikes, are no substitutes for high quality care delivered through general practices.

Dr Chambers added: "The solutions being proposed are already in place. Telehealth and extended general practice teams are already operating across the motu, and yet the real problem is an ever-decreasing number of GPs."

He said that while telehealth can complement general practice for matters not requiring face to face intervention, it removes the possibility for opportunistic care that can only be achieved by being in the same room with a generalist diagnostician.

GenPro believes the solution is neither seeking to replace general practice consultations with telehealth, nor replacing GPs with other health providers. Rather, it is to invest the money needed to make becoming a GP an attractive and viable proposition and to recognise the value of general practice teams and the quality and continuity of care that they deliver.

“We are at a tipping point and access to general practice will be lost forever if the underfunding and undervaluing of GPs and their teams are not addressed immediately,” said Dr Chambers.

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