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## **Which after hours medical service are they coming for next?**

General practitioners (GPs) say health clinics around the country are struggling to keep the doors open during the day, let alone after hours.

In the near future, patients with an urgent illness on Friday night will have two options; wait until Monday, or wait in a crowded hospital emergency department (ED).

For many New Zealanders in remote towns, a long drive to the nearest hospital isn't feasible.

Without a large funding increase, there is no way to recruit much-needed GPs.

According to documents leaked to *Stuff*, [Te Whatu Ora plans to stop after hours general practice services on the West Coast](#).

General Practitioners Aotearoa (GPA) chair Dr Buzz Burrell says the most concerning thing about the leaked documents was West Coast Health's assertion that clinics were losing money.

"That's the fundamental problem right there. General practice in New Zealand is seen as a business, and not as a service," he says.

"What kind of dystopian system lets the market control the availability of front line healthcare?"

Burrell has previously spent eight years working as a GP on the West Coast.

"There are hard-working people there who can only access medical care after hours, and also people with chronic disabilities who need 24/7 care and choose to live on the West Coast because of the affordability of housing," he says.

"The lack of compassion is astounding."

Doctors have been warning for years that primary healthcare on the West Coast is dangerously strained, and this latest news is no surprise to the GP community.

"Our members are telling us after hours services are in danger all over the country," Burrell says.

"Clinics are struggling to keep staffed during the day, let alone at night or on weekends."

The Invercargill Urgent Doctor Society closed in March this year.

Last year, both of Christchurch's main after hours clinics had to reduce their opening hours, leaving the city

temporarily without any 24-hour clinic.

In 2022, Nelson's Medical and Injury Centre was forced to close its linked lowcost clinic because it couldn't afford to keep operating.

These are just a few examples of underfunding preventing people from accessing urgent primary care.

The big cities are not safe from the crisis either.

"For example, our members tell us Wellington, despite being an urgent centre, is terribly staffed," Burrell says.

"The city's after hours facilities are short of doctors and nurses every day because they cannot recruit due to our poor funding."

He says the cities rely heavily on regular GPs working the after hours clinics, when GPs are already overworked and at risk of burnout in their day jobs.

"And of course better access to primary healthcare would actually prevent a huge number of patients turning up at urgent care," Burrell says.

"We need to be investing in primary care, not cutting services. It will save millions down the track."

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## **About General Practitioners Aotearoa**

General Practitioners Aotearoa (GPA) formed after the demise of the New Zealand Medical Association to provide the only independent advocacy group exclusively for doctors working in the general practice sector. Since its launch last year, GPA has been quickly growing and already represents over 10% of GPs in Aotearoa New Zealand.

[gpaotearoa.co.nz](http://gpaotearoa.co.nz)