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Prime Minister sends clear message: Don't bother training as a GP

General Practitioners Aotearoa (GPA) strongly condemns [comments Prime Minister Christopher Luxon made on Newstalk ZB's Kerre Woodham Mornings show](#) on Friday.

Asked by a caller about the lack of positions in hospitals for new nurses, Luxon suggests they could replace general practitioners (GPs) instead.

"We've now got actually a lot of nurses coming through the system and actually we haven't got enough places for them always in the hospital system," Luxon says.

"But we desperately need them in primary care, we need them in aged care as well. And I think there's a real opportunity to think about how we use our nurses, particularly what we call nurse practitioners or nurse prescribers that can increasingly do more of the work of what a GP does. Because today it could take you up to three weeks to get an appointment with the GP."

Luxon goes on to say that if he had an infection, he would rather just see a nurse and get some antibiotics than wait to see a doctor.

This is a gross oversimplification of what GPs do, and suggesting that newly qualified nurses have interchangeable skills with doctors is offensive to both professions.

"First of all, no other profession would tolerate this language," says GPA Chair Dr Buzz Burrell in response. "I'm pretty sure I could steer a truck down the road, but I do not hold a truck driver's licence, and I should absolutely never be trusted to fill spaces if there were a truck driver shortage.

"There is a GP shortage, and the only solution is more GPs."

In Luxon's infection analogy, he assumed his self-diagnosis was correct, and decided what he wanted the treatment to be.

"He thinks he can order a nurse to give him the medication he thinks he needs, which again, is offensive to nurses," Burrell says.

A person with an infection should be assessed by an expert, he says.

"In some cases that should be a nurse prescriber or nurse practitioner. In some cases what the patient thinks is a simple infection requires expert diagnosis of an underlying issue.

"As GPs get rarer in clinics, more scary diagnoses are going to be missed, and more people will suffer."

On the same show, Luxon said “It’s not a money problem” and blamed Health New Zealand bureaucracy for wastage in the health system.

GP clinics mostly sit outside of Health New Zealand, and are underfunded.

“Most clinics run on an oily rag and have very little wastage. If they wasted a cent they’d go under,” Burrell says.

“There is clear evidence that increasing funding to the primary sector increases health system efficiency and enormously reduces overall cost.”

Luxon’s comments show his lack of understanding of how the primary care sector works.

GP clinics are not a prescription disposal service, nor are they simply a stepping stone to hospital care.

“We provide a wide-ranging service that manages the health of most New Zealanders,” says Burrell.

“What we do encompasses everything from diagnosing serious diseases flying under the radar, to managing long-term health conditions for people who need to see us every month,” he says.

“If we accept that the role of primary care is to simply be a triage service for hospitals, then I guess we have lost the battle already.”

Luxon is sending a clear message to trainee doctors: don’t bother becoming a GP, because you are replaceable.

This is part of a wider trend in this Government’s rhetoric that primary care is unimportant, and that GPs are not needed, including a [Health Workforce Plan that almost completely excludes GPs](#).

“I would never insinuate I could do a nurse’s job,” says Burrell. “If the PM wants nurses to do GP jobs, he will quickly find his health system failing, with patients and voters up in arms.”

ENDS

Contact for comment

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We may also be able to connect you with our members who wish to comment on relevant stories – email communications@gpaotearoa.co.nz for more information.

About General Practitioners Aotearoa

General Practitioners Aotearoa (GPA) is the only independent organisation exclusively representing the voices of doctors working in general practice. We represent GPs who are clinic owners, employees, contractors and trainees. We are member-funded and receive no government money. GPA formed after the demise of the New Zealand Medical Association to independently advocate for GPs. gpaotearoa.co.nz