



8 October, 2021

## Nurses and midwives plead caution ahead of NSW reopening

Nurses and midwives have described being 'on tenterhooks' about staffing shortages in Northern NSW public hospitals, while the state focuses on reopening after 15 weeks in lockdown.

NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA) members have urged local communities to exercise caution from next Monday, worried any spike in COVID-19 hospitalisations could overwhelm the health system and its already stretched nursing workforce.

NSWNMA General Secretary, Brett Holmes, said widespread staff shortages were compounded by pandemic fatigue, particularly in regional areas like Northern NSW, where over 160 full-time equivalent (FTE) vacancies have been reported across the Local Health District.

"Prior to the pandemic, many public hospitals were struggling with staff shortages and relying on nurses and midwives' goodwill to accept regular overtime requests to keep their services open," said Mr Holmes.

"Unfortunately, that reliance hasn't dissipated and now we're hearing there are currently 163 FTE nursing vacancies in Northern NSW, with most in critical care, emergency, or medical and surgical departments.

"Our members at Lismore, Tweed, Grafton and the surrounding regions are all anxious about what lies ahead, given they have a very limited casual or agency pool to draw from. This is taking a toll on the remaining nursing staff, who often feel compelled to keep accepting overtime requests.

"[Text messages](#) are being sent to nurses daily, begging them to start early or work double shifts, to address the shortfall. This is not sustainable, especially when nurses and midwives can access safer workloads, as well as better pay and conditions, over the border in Queensland.

"There's still a large portion of experienced nurses working in vaccination hubs and testing clinics, while our local hospitals grapple with understaffing and a junior workforce seeking support and clinical guidance.

"As the community looks forward to reintroducing some normality into their lives from next week, nurses and midwives don't get to share in that luxury. They've had very little reprieve since the pandemic hit our shores some 22 months ago, and it's far from over."

The NSWNMA has encouraged Northern NSW Local Health District to explore all recruitment options to fill the current vacancies and urged other regional health districts to follow suit.

"This situation also isn't isolated to Northern NSW. Our members in many other regional hospitals are struggling with understaffing," added Shaye Candish, NSWNMA Assistant General Secretary.

"We're aware Port Macquarie Base Hospital has had over 70 FTE vacancies recently, Maitland Hospital has more than 30, while Wagga Wagga Hospital is grappling with 64 FTE vacancies.

"These shortages put enormous strain on the remaining workforce, not to mention the additional stresses of the pandemic we're still navigating our way through," she said.

The NSWNMA called on the NSW Government to prioritise the health and wellbeing of all nurses and midwives by introducing nurse-to-patient ratios on every shift, in every ward across the state.



NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association

## Media Release

“Our members have done the hard yards in extremely tough circumstances and there’s still a way to go, but the best way forward is to deliver statewide nurse-to-patient ratios,” Mr Holmes said.

“The NSW Government must listen to nurses and midwives on the frontline and not ignore the fact Queensland, Victoria and Canberra all have ratios. We need a better health system in NSW and to achieve that, you need more staff.”

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