

Nursing shortage: I love NZ, but I moved to Australia because this country doesn't value nurses

By Sarah Elisaia

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Opinion by **Sarah Elisaia**

Sarah Elisaia qualified as a registered nurse in 2020 and now works in Australia.

THREE KEY FACTS

- **Nearly half the country's nurses are not working as nurses, with some taking jobs in even supermarkets or on road gangs in preference to healthcare.**
- **Health New Zealand Te Whatu Ora is seeking to persuade some back to the front lines to help fill chronic shortages.**
- **In July, Te Whatu Ora estimated the system was short about 4800 nurses despite a nearly 23% increase in the number employed in the past five years.**

My earliest memory of knowing that I wanted to become a nurse is my primary school graduation where they had the students make a PowerPoint slide to answer the question "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

After four years of study and 1100 clinical hours of unpaid placements, I began work as a registered nurse in February 2020. I was thrown into the deep end and braved the first year of my career through a global pandemic, serving my community and being labelled a "healthcare hero".

Over the next three years, I saw up close the underfunding, undervaluing and the neglect of patients' rights imposed by successive governments on the healthcare system.

For all the talk of heroes, our pleas for what seemed like bare-minimum resourcing constantly fell on deaf ears. I clocked out of most shifts exhausted, feeling guilt and anxiety for my patients.

In 2023, the number of New Zealanders migrating to Australia nearly doubled, with the nursing profession overrepresented in this figure.

I decided to follow suit and leave the country that had nourished my childhood dream, but quickly transformed that dream into burnout. The decision has rewarded me with financial security, greater work-life balance and less anxiety about patient safety. On paper, it's a no-brainer and yet I still feel terribly homesick.

I recently returned home to visit family and friends and I took the time to [attend the nationwide nurses' strike](#) at Auckland City Hospital. I watched as a crowd of my former colleagues passionately waved signs that read "Look after us, so we can look after you", "Are you joking? We are not coping", and "If nurses are outside, there's a problem inside".

The extreme budget cuts made by the coalition are the most recent acute flare of this chronic illness in the system.

Everything is on the chopping block. In 2022, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists reported we needed 12,000 extra nurses to keep pace with Australia.

Yet at the heart of the present cuts is the claim that New Zealand has 3000 more nurses than it can afford in the budget. When asked if we need those 3000 nurses for the system to function properly, Health Commissioner Lester Levy couldn't answer.

The answer is yes, those nurses and resources are desperately needed and people will die without them.

However, the prevailing logic of this Government is that the budget can somehow be detached from the resources needed to keep people alive and healthy. You can't help but suspect it is setting the system up to fail on purpose.

Accompanying me at the strike was my 2-year old niece. I took photos of her carefully wrapping her tiny hands around a "safe staffing now" sign the same size as her.

In that moment I was overwhelmed with how each day was a missed opportunity to watch my niece grow and become her own person.

I spent each day of my trip home soaking up the joy of being around my favourite people in the entire world. I wasn't prepared for how much grief and heartache was waiting for me once I returned to video calls instead of cuddles.

Back here in Australia, I'm constantly reminded that New Zealand nurses are internationally renowned and sought after for their dedication, skill and attitude. We're trained to a high standard in our home country and then forced abroad to try to make a life and pay our bills.

I do wonder how many of us are yearning for home the way I am. If our Government treated nurses with respect by way of safe staffing, pay equity and workforce empowerment, how many of us would be booking the next flight home? How many families would be able to forge memories together instead of via FaceTime and WhatsApp?

My mantra is if you didn't want to be a nurse anymore, you simply wouldn't be.

It is both a great blessing and burden to be responsible for the lives and wellbeing of others. There are countless other career paths that are easier emotionally, spiritually, physically and financially.

Yet as a nurse, I feel it is our responsibility to believe in better for all of us, and that means to debunk the lie that we can't fund the health system adequately. New Zealand has accepted this lie for years and the truth is a measly three-hour flight away.

As business oriented as healthcare is becoming, the greatest cost on a balance sheet will always be someone's life. Act Party minister Brooke van Velden boldly put on record that when it came to government spending on Covid, "We completely blew out what the value of a life was" – insinuating there is money to save in lieu. It is ideology like this that is sending hordes of our young workers abroad and driving this acute phase of illness that threatens the entire nursing profession in New Zealand.

Nurses are trained and experienced in recognising a deteriorating patient. As a society, we'd be wise to start observing signs of deterioration too. What are the nurses saying?

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