

In New Zealand, junior doctors (known here as resident doctors or RMOs) are represented by our own organization, NZRDA. NZRDA aims to protect and enhance the interests of RMOs – while we do not work in isolation from our senior or GP colleagues and other representative medical organisations, we acknowledge that conflicts of interests may arise and hence need our own voice.

NZRDA represents our members on many different issues, however we are also a registered union and negotiate the RMOs' employment contract. Despite 15 months of negotiation, we have failed to settle this contract and this has resulted in national strike action on two occasions – with potentially more to come. This action has taken the form of a complete withdrawal of labour for two 48 hour periods roughly 2 weeks apart.

Membership of NZRDA is entirely voluntary – normally about 85% of the RMOs in NZ are members of NZRDA; running up to the strikes this grew to over 90%. The decision to walk off the job was certainly difficult for our 2,500 members, however the wider issues confronting us have undoubtedly hardened our resolve. At the forefront of these many issues is our medical workforce crisis.

We have massive retention problems in NZ. A recent WHO/OECD report found that NZ trains the fewest doctors and exports more graduates than most other OECD countries. Our reliance on overseas trained doctors was amongst the highest of all OECD countries – putting NZ at significant risk and entirely dependent on a volatile international labour market.

Moreover, we have high vacancy rates and the locum market has responded to this – the starting pay for an RMO in permanent employment is \$23 an hour; locums earn a minimum of \$45 and upwards of \$120 an hour. It is unsurprising that many RMOs are leaving permanent employment to locum for fewer hours and more pay – naturally this leaves gaps, and the increasing demand on remaining staff further pushes people towards the locum market.

Some have commented that our conditions are so much better than the NHS – so why are we complaining? Our conditions have only been gained through collective activity through NZRDA – and as we will never have a 'perfect' contract more work will always need to be done.

There has also been some concern from UK doctors working in NZ that the government is heading down the same poorly conceived 'Modernising Medical Careers' process. Talk of an 'employment framework for RMOs to best meet the needs of the public' sounds worrying like what has befallen the NHS.

If you are thinking of coming "down under", you might want to keep track of where we are at with this ongoing dispute. You will also have to be careful about what you are being offered: NZRDA has already assisted a number of UK grads

who have arrived in NZ and found things are not as they had been told. NZRDA is available to advise and assist on your request – we have a UK grads section on our website (www.nzrda.org.nz) or you can email us directly at secretary@nzrda.org.nz.