

TO THE RESIDENT DOCTORS OF NEW ZEALAND

Dear Colleagues

The year is 2011; the place, Auckland. Hundreds of babies, children, and teenagers are falling ill. They are being sent home from crèches, schools and workplaces, and some are even being hospitalised with a disease that can carry life-threatening consequences. The disease is highly contagious, resulting in ready transmission and rapid spread amongst the susceptible Auckland population. Perhaps worst of all in a modern first-world country such as New Zealand, the disease in question is almost entirely preventable through vaccination.

The disease is measles. The simple and readily available prevention is the MMR vaccine given in childhood. Mumps and rubella, the other two components in the vaccine, are equally distressing diseases with no place in modern New Zealand.

How did such a preventable illness spread through Auckland when an effective vaccine has been part of the childhood schedule for almost 50 years? A major reason is naivety and complacency, leading to apathy and a hubris that "this won't hurt us, we don't need to get our children vaccinated."

In an era in which vaccination has relegated a host of previously widespread serious illnesses to distant memory amongst many in the population, vaccination rates had fallen to historic lows in Auckland. They had fallen below the threshold where so-called "herd immunity" is able to protect those few who cannot be given the vaccine for medical reasons or who remain non-immune despite receiving the vaccine. Further measles outbreaks were to occur in 2013 and into 2014, believed to be from overseas arrivals carrying the virus into an insufficiently vaccinated local population.

The above medical example is an illustration of how easy it is for previously hard-won gains to disappear if collective action, cohesion and lessons of the past are forgotten. RMO working conditions – which have improved steadily and necessarily over the past 30 years – are a vaccine against fatigue and unsafe work practices. Back in the dark ages of the 1980s, RMOs often worked more than 100 hours a week as there were no limits on hours. Doctors suffered. Their families suffered. Patient care suffered.

Over time, most doctors have come to realise that the approach of "work till you drop" is simply not acceptable if we are to deliver safe care, participate effectively in training, and sustain our own personal wellbeing. Society's expectations of the quality of care they receive has rightfully increased, and fatigued doctors delivering substandard care cannot be tolerated or condoned for any reason, including the excuse that training requires doctors to work demonstrably unsafe rosters.

Recent events threatening doctors' working conditions are therefore of great concern. With a lack of RMO unity comes a lack of herd immunity. Predators are only too quick

and too keen to attack the isolated, weak and divided. Health services are under ever-increasing pressure like never before to provide more complex care for ageing and multi-morbid populations with relatively fewer resources. In this environment all health care workers, including RMOs, are at great risk of bearing the brunt of these pressures and suffering from regressions to working conditions not seen for many years – and indeed well beyond the memory of most RMOs working today.

Individual RMOs or small groups of RMOs are vulnerable to inevitable (and understandable) pressures from our hospitals, our colleagues and our patients. We are vulnerable to our own desire to always say yes and not disappoint those relying on us, even if doing so carries short- and long-term risks. We are vulnerable to misperceptions that time not spent in service is time not learning and not training. As high achieving individuals we are at risk of the hubris that “I’m not fatigued, and besides, my own training won’t suffer”. Fortunately we can be shielded from these external and personal vulnerabilities by those around us: family, colleagues, and – if we support it – a collective medical culture which sees the bigger picture and has a sustainable outlook for the medical profession.

The RDA provides that collective medical culture. It sees the bigger picture. It protects RMOs through their most vulnerable years, when doctors face myriad pressures to work and train and still have some sort of life. The RDA has done so for nearly 30 years, and is more vital now – and more an intrinsic part of our health sector – than ever before. And yet, like those who won’t vaccinate, the good work of many hard-working colleagues over many years can be still undone by the actions or inactions of the selfish, naive and solipsistic. Personal short-term exigencies, misinformation and flat-out inaccurate information is never the way to better health and a better system.

So, to you colleagues who care: be collegial, be collective, remember the not-too-distant past, and never take the gains of modernity for granted. Don’t be selfish, don’t be measly. Be the vaccine, and build a better world.

Yours sincerely,

NZRDA Life Members



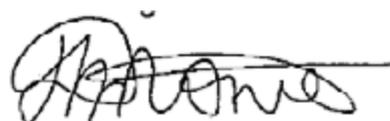
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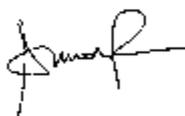
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