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Health leaders to incoming government: Do better



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Health leaders are speaking out about healthcare plans outlined in the Government's coalition agreements [Image: Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona on Unsplash]

“It is morally bereft...and I am very angry”

Healthcare leaders are reacting with shock and anger to the policy directions laid out in the incoming Government’s coalition agreements.

“To be able to say, ‘Oh, it’s okay, it’s all right to do all the things we are going to do’ without any care in the world...it’s just so...frustrating,” says Te Kōhao Health director and Wai 2575 claimant Lady Tureiti Moxon.

“We’ve worked so hard to get this far, and now we’re going to go backwards, and in the name of what? Making rich people richer. We are creating a country that actually privileges the privileged.”

She rejects the Government’s railing against “race-based” policies. “Well, you know what? We’ve been dealing with race-based health policies for years and years.

“And just ask yourself, who has the power, who has the control, who has the resources? It isn’t Māori. It never has and never will be.

“This is about making Māori and Te Tiriti invisible.”

Government plans

The coalition agreements between National, ACT and New Zealand First were revealed last Friday, and include plans to disestablish Te Aka Whai Ora, “examine” the targeted admission schemes at the University of Auckland and University of Otago medical schools “to determine if they are delivering desired outcomes”, repeal smokefree legislation and end “race-based” policies.

The agreements do not mention additional funding for general practice, and the ACT Party today **confirmed** to *New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa* that its proposed capitation funding boost would not happen.

Lawyering up

Lady Tureiti hasn't given up on preserving Te Aka Whai Ora, saying "all options are on the table" and they are lawyering up, but she urges other healthcare practitioners to speak out as well.

On the planned repeal of the smokefree legislation, she had one word: "disgraceful".

"It just breaks my heart because 5000 people die a year from [tobacco-related illness], and they're mostly low socio-economic, you know? But that's okay now because they choose to smoke and rest of us can just enjoy life."

"Unholy deal"

The repeal is “morally bereft” says University of Auckland professor of general practice and primary care and tobacco researcher Chris Bullen.

“If the new Government wants to see more people suffering to pay for its tax cuts, that is an unholy deal to me.

“It is morally bereft...and I am very angry.”

While expecting some pushback on the legislation, he was blindsided by the decision to repeal: “and the reason I’m shocked is that this is a complete indictment of decades of effort, research and policy shaping by researchers, communities and organisations”.

Professor Bullen expects smoking rates to improve gradually but says the process will now be slowed dramatically “and each year of delay will mean thousands more people dying from tobacco harm”.

“Rude”

Buzz Burrell, interim chair of General Practice Aotearoa, says the Government's policy direction is "disappointing, Trumpish and rude".

"It's rude to Māori, rude to providers of primary and preventative care, and rude to everyone working in remediating drug and alcohol addiction."

The Marlborough general practice owner and specialist GP says the loss of Te Aka Whai Ora will damage efforts to achieve equity in healthcare: "You cannot say this is a positive step and I am yet to hear a convincing argument that it is a good idea."

He also fails to see any logic behind the return of pseudoephedrine products: "They seem to be saying 'meth is on the street anyway, so what is a bit more going to do?' I mean, really?"

The GPA will send an "open, honest and frank" briefing document to incoming health minister Shane Reti before Christmas.

Great leap backwards

Peter Crampton, professor of public health in Kōhatu, the centre of Māori health at the University of Otago, says it is “distressing” to see an end coming for Te Aka Whai Ora.

“It is a powerful mechanism for driving health advancement for Māori communities, I don’t understand why it is that the Government is choosing to put the brakes on Māori leadership in areas that are vitally important to Māori.”

Professor Crampton also says the upcoming repeal of smokefree legislation is “a great leap backwards... a retrograde step that can’t possibly be seen as desirable”.

In a **press release**, Jason Alexander, chief executive of public health agency Hāpai te Hauora, says the Government’s plans could have catastrophic implications for Māori and the social cohesion of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In a further **release**, the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine says it is “disappointed” with the decision to disestablish Te Aka Whai Ora.

The RNZCGP is not commenting on the plan at this time.

University of Otago and University of Auckland leaders are also not making any comment on the planned investigations into their enrolment schemes until more detail is known.

New Zealand Doctor hopes to speak to incoming health minister Shane Reti later this week.

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