

Health equity in Aotearoa has been left unaddressed for far too long. The longer we ignore it, the more urgent the issues will become and the greater the resources which are lost in terms of human potential and lives. The RACP is committed to making health the norm for all, now.

Our members look beyond a three-year election cycle for the resources to make and sustain the changes urgently needed to realise the promises of Te Tiriti o Waitangi – equity, active protection, and tino rangatiratanga for all people of Aotearoa. We recognise that good health is supported by much more than infrastructure or staff: we need to look at the factors that promote healthiness, and work outside our traditional borders to advocate, collaborate and create.

The RACP's vision for health equity in Aotearoa NZ is enduring. We want to see a more fair and just society for the year when Aotearoa commemorates the bicentennial of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 2040.

Our vision for Aotearoa in 2040: The law supports Good Work

- All work supports good health and wellbeing for workers and their whānau
- All workers are supported by equitable rights and conditions in legislation

RACP recommendations to make Good Work the norm

- Double mandatory available sick leave in Act to 10 days; allow for use if dependents are unwell, for example half days, or allowing advance use/carrying over allocations into following years
- Workplaces foster cultures which protect and promote health and wellbeing and support innovation, with government incentives in place for demonstrated good practice
- The Employment Act is amended to include provision for contractors

Jo is 35 and is living in a regional city. She's sleeping on friends' couches after leaving a violent relationship and works full-time at the local supermarket. Jo has chronic back pain, but she is battling through to save a bond so she and her children can have a fresh start. Jo had already used her 5 days' sick leave entitlement for the year and is worried it will take her months to save enough money to put a roof over their heads.



“I'm barely scraping by, especially during a crazy year like 2020. My pain has been flaring up, and some days I find it so hard to get up and leave the house for work.”

I really need to get a bond together so the kids and I can have a fresh start. I take all the shifts I am offered and take extra ones, even when my pain is bad”

JO, WHO HAS CHRONIC PAIN

Promoting and protecting health and wellbeing at work – for all workers

Presenteeism (working while unwell), not only prolongs recovery time, it risks transmission of infections to others, and affects productivity. Presenteeism in the workplace harms mental and physical health for the unwell person and has impacts on colleagues. The current sick leave provisions unfairly disadvantage women, who are often the ones who take time off to look after sick children or the elderly, and those from diverse cultural backgrounds who may not feel comfortable taking formal sick leave due to their cultural norms.

Increase sick leave to make Good Work the norm

To make Good Work the norm, workplaces must encourage workers to use sick days and flexible work policies when they are ill. When workplace and societal culture supports people to stay home when unwell, workers will be better able to recover, and their whānau will benefit too. Some organisations are exploring ways to support employee wellbeing while minimising risks to productivity, such as not putting a limit on sick leave. Reports from these companies show that policies are not abused, and the flexibility and security of uncapped entitlements was welcomed by workers. Domestic leave when dependents, and whānau are unwell is also important, as this has many positive benefits for wellbeing.

The currently legislated five days of sick leave per year does not allow for people to recover from illness, or cater for people living with chronic illness, where regular hospital admissions or intensive treatments are required to keep them as well as possible. It increases the risk of communicable diseases in workplaces, on public transport and in other public spaces. The provisions do not recognise that individuals all have different health and community needs.

When people run out of sick leave, their options are limited. Because many whānau cannot afford to go without a day's income, people are forced to go to work unwell. The fear of being unable to work within inflexible sick leave provisions may mean some people choose not to work or feel limited to certain vocational pathways, depriving our workforce of talent.

Anna is 25 and living downtown in a large city. Anna is recently unemployed, having lost her marketing job. Although she has good insight into her mental health as she has lived experience of anxiety and the pandemic was a shock. By July, Anna was unemployed: her employer was not eligible for the extension of the wage subsidy and had undertaken a restructure in early June, scaling back the company by nearly 70 per cent.



“I have applied for so many jobs, but I’m not getting interviews. I have anxiety and it feels like I will never get a job. I am thinking about becoming a delivery driver, just to keep some money coming in, but I know from my friends that do it, it’s insecure. If I get sick, I won’t get any sick pay”

ANNA ON GIG WORK

The Gig economy

Work and employment are increasingly diverse, with options for employment beyond a traditional job where a person is paid a wage or salary. New types of work include the burgeoning ‘gig economy’. While gig work is relatively autonomous, flexible, and can be highly innovative, gig workers – the unincorporated self-employed – do not have access to the entitlements and structural certainty of traditional employees. The range of work considered contract or gig work is diverse, and incomes can vary, meaning everyone from Uber drivers to people working in the film industry are gig workers.

Surveys in Aotearoa NZ have shown that many gig workers would prefer a permanent job; the most frequent reason for taking temporary work was that no other work was available. Gig work is inherently precarious and unpredictable, with irregular hours and income. These characteristics can contribute to poor health and wellbeing. Contractors have to manage their own ACC levies, and handle their own GST. They have no access to the worker protections under the Employment Act, which means that the balance of risk is disproportionately placed against them.

COVID-19 will mean a changed employment and work landscape. Preferences for flexible working arrangements, could lead to increases in the numbers of casual or “gig” workers in Aotearoa NZ. Ensuring they are covered and protected by legislation must be a priority as the country enters a prolonged recovery phase.