

INVITED EDITORIAL

Two decades of student voice: reflections and the road ahead

Ayesha Verrall

When starting the New Zealand Student Medical Journal (NZMSJ) 20 years ago, we were driven by a desire to support the professional development of New Zealand's medical students, while building a platform to share their research and voices. As students, we struggled to find spaces where we could engage in meaningful discussions, share diverse opinions, and formally showcase our work. The journal became part of the solution—a forum where medical students could not only publish research but also explore current issues, emerging challenges and the future of healthcare.

The aim was to create a collaborative space for students to engage with each other's ideas, shaping our collective understanding of medicine and the healthcare system. It's incredible to see how the journal has evolved into a valuable resource for students across New Zealand. Over the years, it's been exciting to see the introduction of initiatives like the creative arts competition, strong relationships with educational providers, and clever adaptations to the evolving media landscape.

This is the dynamic and collaborative future we hoped the journal would have when we first started it. As students, we were filled with energy, curiosity, and a deep commitment to our profession, despite its many challenges. Today, having worked both as a doctor and Health Minister, I remain convinced that entering the medical profession is one of the most powerful and fulfilling decisions anyone can make.

These days, my diagnostic skills are kept busy in Parliament, tracking the cuts the current National-led Government is planning as they attempt to strip \$2 billion from our healthcare system. Underfunding, workforce shortages, and high levels of stress on frontline staff are urgent issues that the Government continues to downplay. But this also highlights why the roles of doctors, nurses, and all healthcare professionals are more vital than ever. Now, more than ever, our skills, compassion, critical thinking, and ability to work as a team will shape the future of our healthcare system.

During my time as a medical student, I also had the privilege of serving as president of the Otago University Students' Association. That experience not only fostered lifelong relationships, but also gave us a platform to advocate for the issues that mattered most. We were encouraged to question the status quo, push for positive change, and, above all, support each other. Those early days of student activism taught me that being part of a medical community goes beyond developing clinical skills. It's about creating an inclusive space where we can share ideas, lift each other up, and advocate for the patients and communities we serve.

Our medical workforce is remarkably resilient. Through changes and challenges, healthcare workers continue to show up day after day to care for those in need. Policies and systems will continue to change, but the commitment of those working within the system remains constant. At the same time, we must continue to fight for better working conditions for all healthcare professionals—doctors, nurses,

and allied health workers—because they are the backbone of the system.

To those entering the medical profession today, I'd like to say: Please don't be discouraged by the issues facing the healthcare sector. Behind the headlines are thousands of people who receive incredible, life-changing care every day. Where there are gaps and shortfalls, use these as motivation to innovate, advocate, and create change alongside your colleagues. There is immense power in collective action, and as the next generation of medical professionals, you have the power to shape the future of the system.

We have a long way to go to ensure our health system is adequately funded and resourced. It's vital that we push back against the Government's cuts and advocate for stronger investment in healthcare to ensure all communities across New Zealand get the care they deserve. But beyond policy and funding, there is something deeply powerful about the experience of care itself—the connection between doctor and patient, the dedication to service, and those quiet moments of compassion that transform lives. Every patient we care for, every community we serve, and every scientific breakthrough that improves lives—it all matters. Your work will make a difference, and your commitment to your patients will create a ripple effect that lasts for generations.

About the author

> Dr Ayesha Verrall is a Labour List MP based in Wellington, and has previously held the roles of Minister of Health and Minister of Research, Science and Innovation, as well as Minister for COVID-19 Response and Minister for Seniors. She is Labour's spokesperson for Health, Public Service and Wellington Issues.

> Ayesha grew up in Te Anau and is an infectious diseases doctor. She attended medical school at the University of Otago, during which she founded the NZMSJ, and worked as a junior doctor at Wellington hospital. Ayesha completed her specialist training in Singapore and researched tuberculosis in Indonesia. She is an expert on vaccines, tuberculosis and COVID-19. During the pandemic response, Ayesha was instrumental in improving New Zealand's contact tracing. She lives in Wellington with her partner Alice and their daughter.

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