Radiology at a crossroads

Workforce pressures and emerging industrial challenges

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Western Australia's radiology workforce is facing mounting pressure from a combination of increasing demand, workforce shortages, funding constraints, and changing service delivery models. While radiologists have long adapted to growing clinical workloads, the current environment is placing unprecedented strain on both public and private services, raising important industrial and workforce issues for the profession.

Demand growth meets workforce shortages

Demand for imaging services continues to rise across metropolitan and regional WA, increasing reliance on radiological services throughout the healthcare system. At the same time, workforce shortages, training bottlenecks and recruitment challenges continue to constrain capacity across both public and private sectors. The result is growing pressure on radiologists, increasing reporting delays, and heightened risks to workforce wellbeing and service sustainability.

Funding and capacity challenges

Many in the profession argue that radiology has experienced prolonged periods of underinvestment. Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) fees for radiology services were effectively frozen for many years, limiting the sector's ability to respond to increasing costs and demand. While the Commonwealth Government has recently resumed indexation of radiology rebates, workforce shortages and capacity constraints remain significant concerns.

In the public sector, limitations on equipment replacement, infrastructure expansion and training positions have contributed to capacity challenges. As a result, a substantial volume of public hospital imaging is outsourced to private providers, creating dependencies between public and private services at a time when both sectors are experiencing workforce pressures.

Public-private interdependence

Radiology highlights the interdependence of Australia's public and private health systems. Public hospitals increasingly rely on private providers to meet demand, while both sectors compete for the same limited specialist workforce. Changes to funding arrangements, billing practices or workforce movement can therefore have significant consequences across the system.

Ongoing Commonwealth scrutiny of arrangements involving privately delivered imaging for public patients may further expose existing workforce and infrastructure deficits, if additional costs are shifted on to public health services.

Competition for a scarce workforce

Policy changes that improve the viability of private radiology services may benefit patients through increased service availability and competition. However, they may also intensify workforce competition. For many radiologists, public-sector employment offers opportunities beyond clinical practice, including teaching, training and research, which are professional activities that play a critical role in developing the next generation of specialists and advancing medical knowledge.

However, when clinical workloads consume virtually all available departmental capacity, opportunities for research and training can become increasingly difficult to sustain. Protecting these elements of professional practice will be important if public hospitals are to remain attractive workplaces for specialist radiologists. Maintaining a strong public radiology workforce will require not only investment and policy reform, but also a sustained focus on the workplace conditions, professional opportunities and career pathways that influence where radiologists choose to practise.

Industrial concerns remain

From an industrial relations perspective, workforce attraction and retention are inseparable from employment conditions. Radiologists employed within the public health system continue to raise concerns regarding aspects of their industrial entitlements, including access to employment conditions available to other medical practitioners and the resolution of longstanding industrial arrangements.

As with all specialist workforce groups facing shortages, unresolved industrial issues can disproportionately impact recruitment and retention. Ensuring modern, equitable and competitive employment arrangements will be an important component of maintaining a sustainable public radiology workforce.

The next round of bargaining for public sector doctors in 2027 will provide an important opportunity to address longstanding industrial concerns and improve the attractiveness of public-sector radiology practice. The AMA (WA) will be advancing claims aimed at strengthening recruitment, retention, and career sustainability, recognising that workforce challenges cannot be solved through recruitment alone.

The effectiveness of that advocacy will be strengthened by an engaged and representative membership, ensuring radiologists have a strong voice in shaping the outcomes of bargaining.

Regional WA faces additional pressures

These challenges are particularly pronounced in regional and remote areas. The Western Australian Country Health Service (WACHS) relies heavily on external providers to deliver radiology services across large geographic areas. Recruiting and retaining specialist radiologists in regional settings has proven difficult,

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making service continuity vulnerable to broader workforce shortages. As governments seek to provide more care closer to home, including advanced imaging for stroke, cardiac disease and emerging screening programs, access to a stable radiology workforce will become increasingly important for regional communities.

Learning from international experience

Discussions about workforce shortages inevitably raise questions about role substitution and expanded scopes of practice. While there may be opportunities for multidisciplinary collaboration and more efficient service delivery, workforce reform must be carefully balanced against patient safety, training quality and regulatory requirements. Workforce reforms introduced during periods of acute staff shortage can have lasting consequences for training and service quality.

Shaping the future

Radiology sits at the centre of modern medicine, making workforce issues a whole-of-system concern. Meeting future demand will require investment in workforce development, competitive employment conditions, adequate infrastructure, and sustainable funding models. From an industrial relations perspective, the message is simple.

Workforce shortages cannot be addressed solely through recruitment. Retention, professional development, fair employment conditions and long-term workforce planning must form part of the solution if the radiology profession, and the patients who depend on it, are to thrive. Achieving those outcomes will require governments, employers and clinicians to work together – but it will also require radiologists to engage in the collective representation that gives the profession a meaningful voice in shaping its future. ■

“Radiologists have a critical opportunity to shape their future. With bargaining on the horizon and significant workforce challenges confronting the profession, the AMA (WA) encourages all radiologists working in the public system to become actively engaged in the collective representation of their profession.

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