

**IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT
CHECKS**

Organisation: Health Services Union - NSW ACT QLD (HSU)

Date Received: 16 September 2024



Children at Risk

**HSU Special Report on staff
shortages in Australia's premier
children's health service**

About Us

The Health Services Union (HSU) represents over 51,000 members across the public and private health, ambulance, Aboriginal health, aged care, disability, and mental health sectors. Our members, who serve in big cities and remote towns, are integral to the healthcare system—often being the first on the scene and the last to be seen in a patient's journey. Their unwavering dedication and professionalism are crucial to the functioning of our health services.

Central to HSU's mission is to advocate for high-quality, equitable, and affordable patient-centred care throughout New South Wales (NSW). It is imperative that all individuals, especially children and young people, have guaranteed access to necessary healthcare. Effective care relies on an adequately resourced, supported, and staffed workforce to meet the growing complexity and demand for services across NSW.

About This Report

In August and September 2024, HSU surveyed 57 allied health professionals from the Sydney Children's Hospital Network (SCHN) to inform its snapshot submission to the NSW Parliament Childhood Development and Healthcare Inquiry. The SCHN was selected as a case study because it serves patients from across NSW. It also retains some of Australia's most highly skilled and experienced allied health professionals.

The survey respondents included dietitians, psychologists, physiotherapists, genetic counsellors, pharmacists, social workers, radiographers, scientists, speech pathologists, audiologists and other allied health professionals. The average age was 42 years, with 92% identifying as women and 8% as men, and an average of 17 years of service in the health sector. Of those surveyed, 73% were employed full-time, 25% part-time, and 2% in casual or temporary roles. HSU also conducted focus group sessions to validate the survey results and hear directly from allied health professionals. This data reflects current workforce trends and provides insights frequently absent from government analyses. The expert and highly skilled allied health staff at SCHN present alarming findings that demand immediate attention from policymakers and politicians.

Executive Summary

Critical Staffing Shortages

Nearly 90% of respondents reported significant staffing shortages, affecting SCHN's ability to meet demand and deliver essential allied and developmental health services to children.

Adverse Outcomes and Risks to Children

62% confirmed that understaffing has led to adverse health outcomes for children in the past year. Only 5.5% believe that adequate developmental checks are being conducted across the NSW health system. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and First Nations communities face heightened risks due to limited access to vital healthcare.

Executive Summary

Inadequate Wages and High Staff Turnover

41% of respondents cited low wages as the main reason they are considering leaving their roles. Poor workplace culture and unsafe staffing levels are further driving dissatisfaction and high turnover rates, with a majority of allied health staff considering or planning to leave SCHN.

Fear of Speaking Up

Over 51% of respondents fear raising concerns about workplace conditions and practices due to potential repercussions from senior management. This culture of silence prevents critical issues affecting patient care and staff wellbeing from being addressed.

Executive Summary

Immediate Action Required

Urgent intervention is needed to resolve staffing shortages and workplace issues that are compromising the capacity of children and families to access the essential allied and developmental health services they require. Policymakers must act urgently to ensure adequate staffing and a supportive work environment to safeguard children's healthcare in NSW.

Recommendations

Mandatory Reporting on Paediatric Health Gaps:

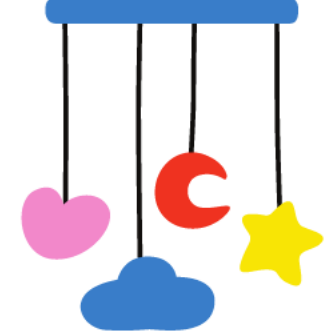
NSW Health must monitor and publicly report unfilled allied health vacancies and unmet paediatric healthcare demand. It must fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensuring all children—not just those aged 0-5—have access to essential healthcare and developmental checks, including allied health services.

Boost Staffing and Resources:

Urgently increase funding to recruit additional allied health professionals. Chronic staffing shortages, flagged by the Henry Review (2020) and reinforced by this report, are crippling paediatric allied health services. More staff means closing gaps and delivering timely, effective care for children.



Recommendations



Improve Wages and Retention:

Raise wages to compete with interstate and private sector rates. Expand government incentives to attract and retain staff and make NSW Health live up to its stated goal of being an 'employer of choice'. Enhance workplace conditions through the current Award Modernisation reform process to reduce turnover and improve staff morale.

Foster a Safe Reporting Culture:

Establish a secure, confidential system for staff to report workplace issues without fear of retaliation. Encourage transparency and address concerns promptly to improve patient care and working conditions.

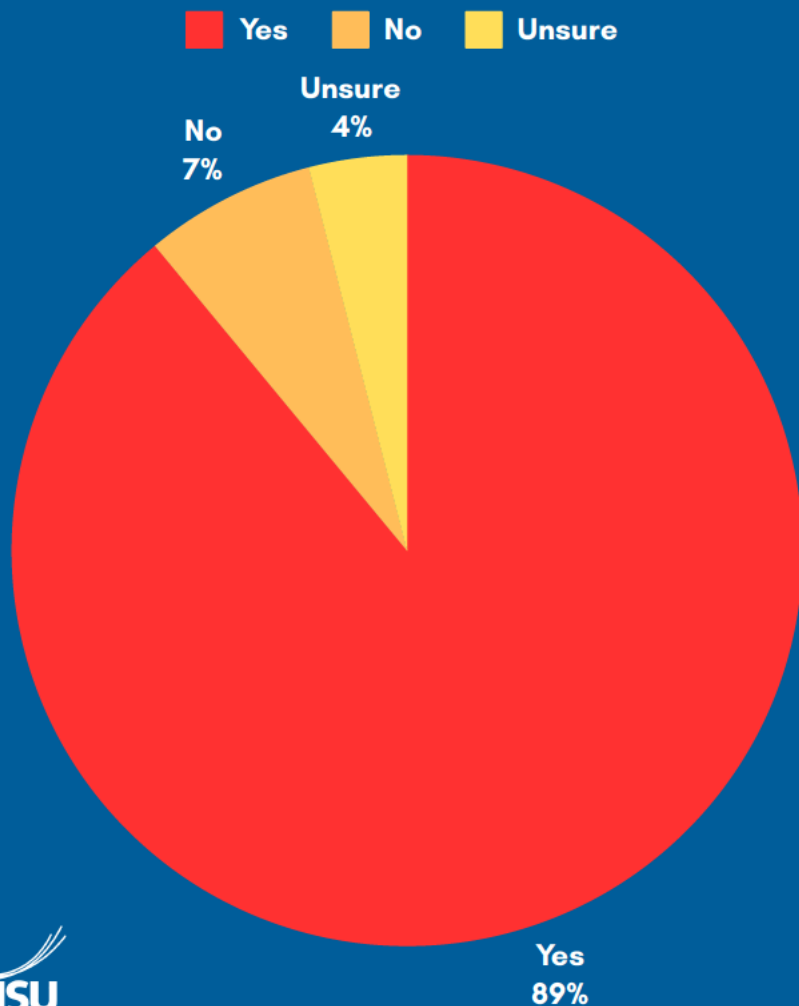
Expand Access for Vulnerable Groups:

Launch and expand targeted initiatives to improve healthcare access for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, remote areas, First Nations communities and other vulnerable cohorts. Ensure NSW Health services have the resources to meet essential childhood and developmental healthcare demand. Use outreach programs and telehealth services to bridge gaps and address specific needs effectively.

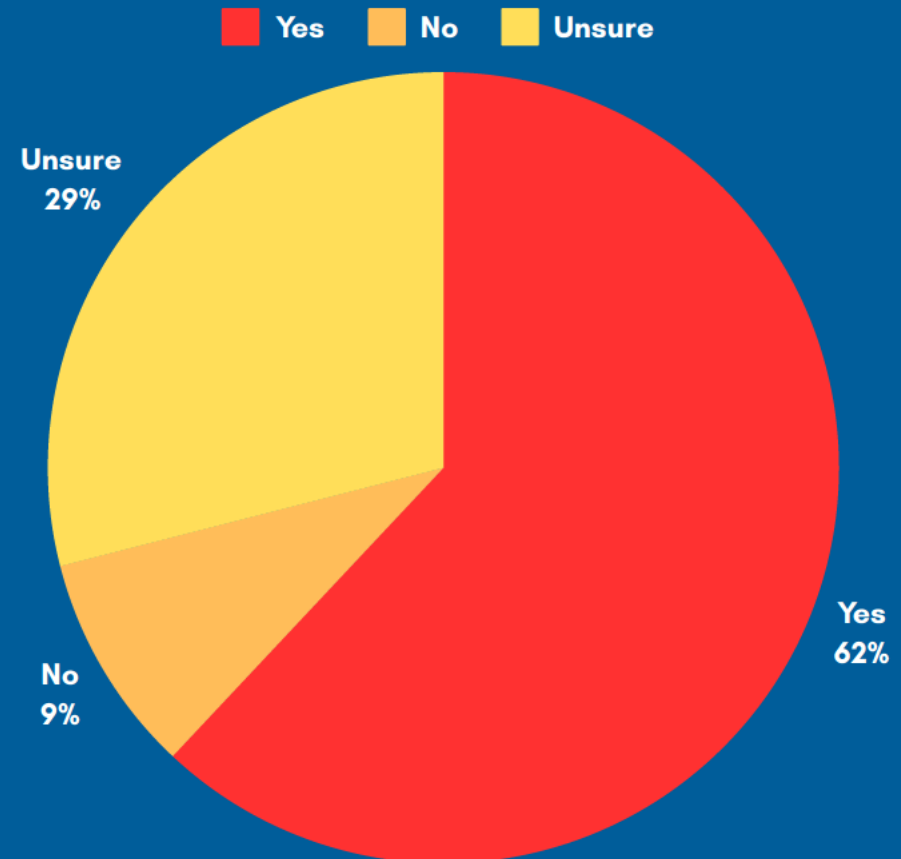
What SCHN Allied Health Professionals Report – The Data

Survey results from SCHN allied health professionals reveal the following:

Staffing shortages in your department:

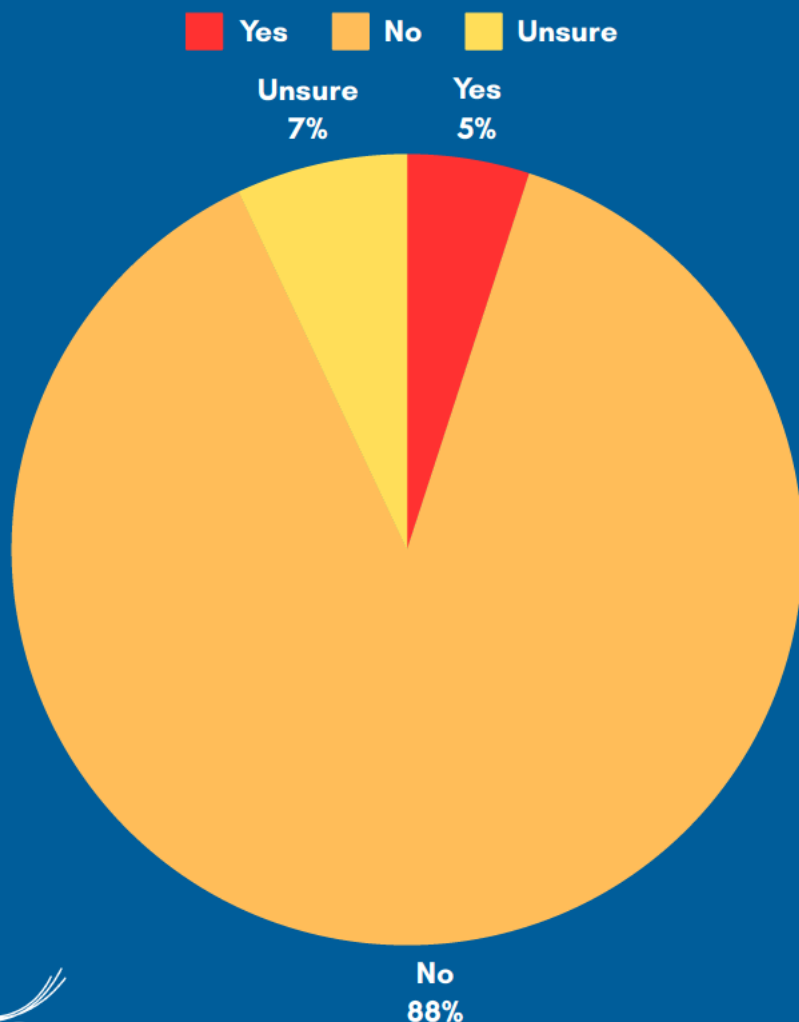


Understaffing leading to adverse child patient outcomes:

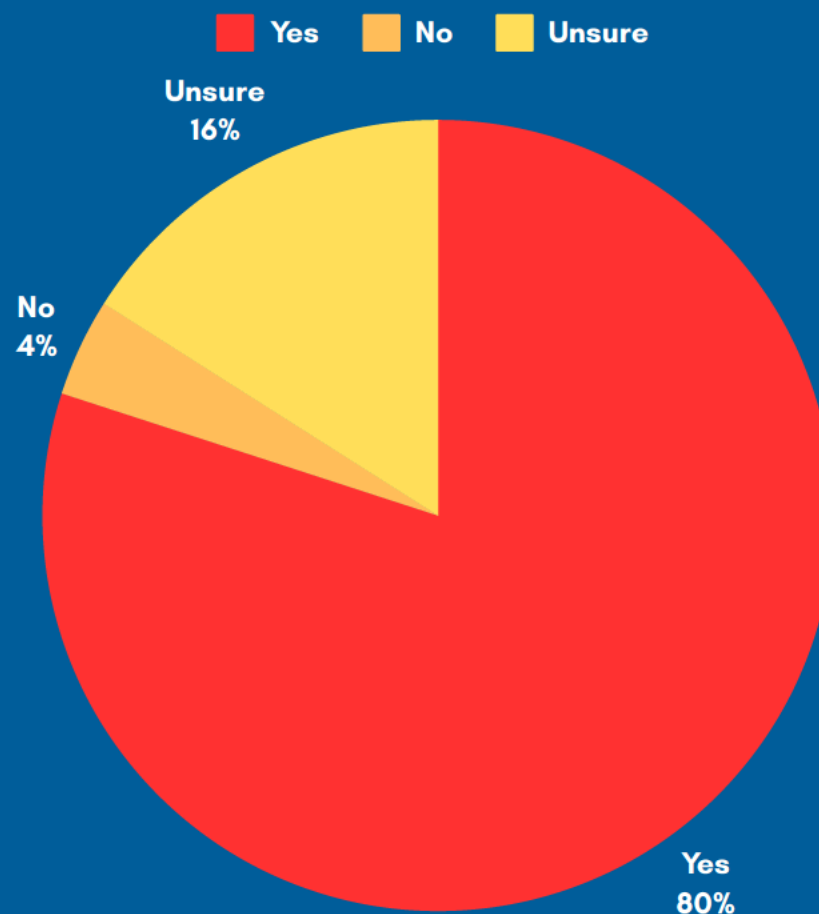


What SCHN Allied Health Professionals Report – The Data

Can SCHN meet the demand for allied health services for children:

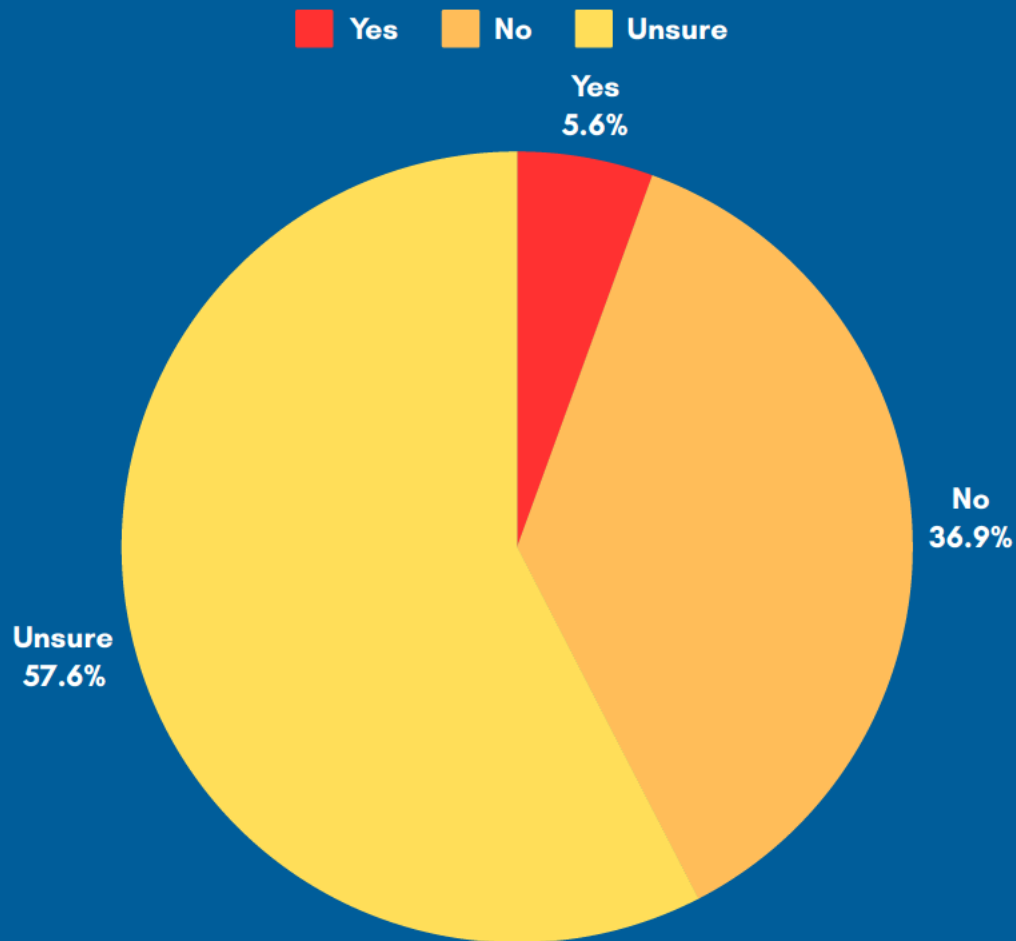


Risk to children's developmental health due to short-staffing or lack of resources:

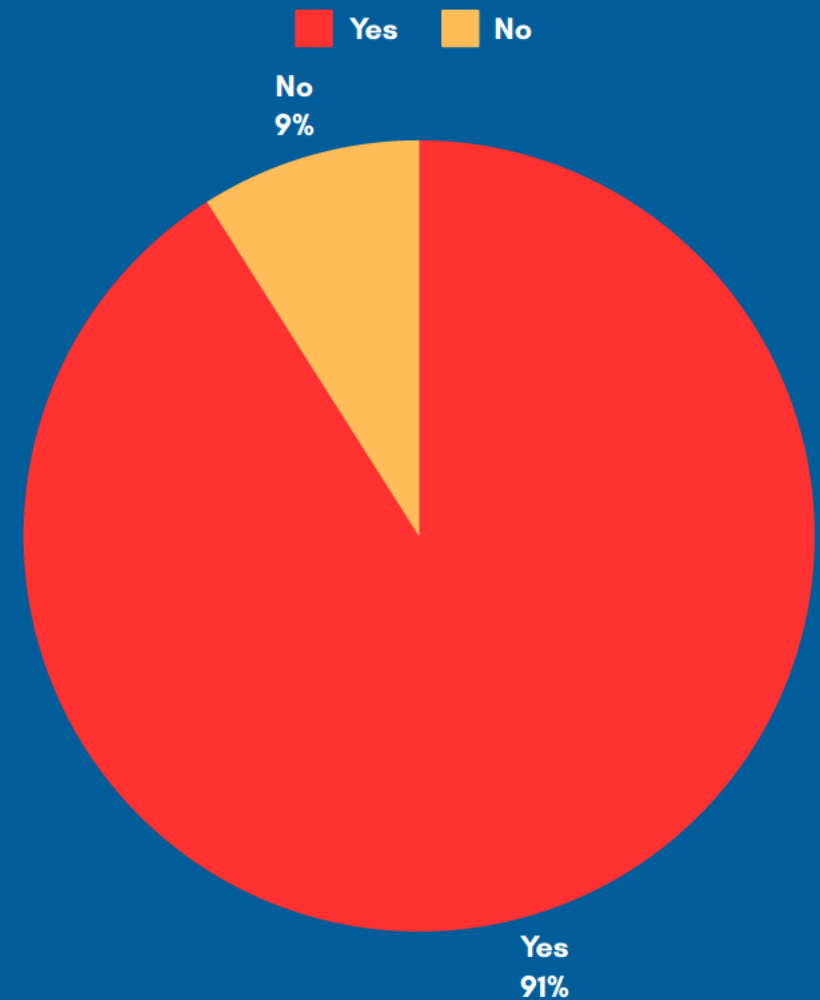


What SCHN Allied Health Professionals Report – The Data

Are children receiving adequate developmental checks?



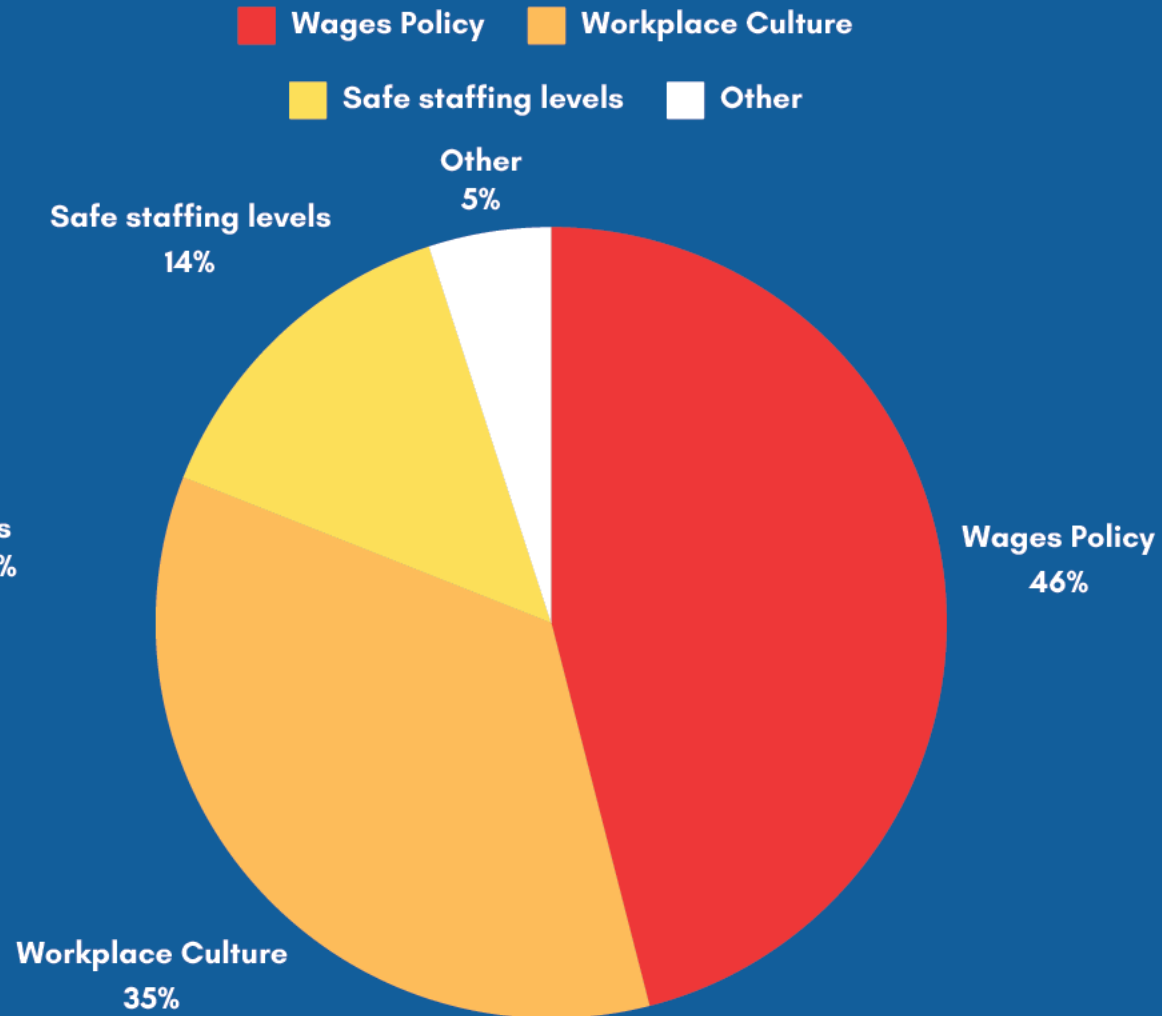
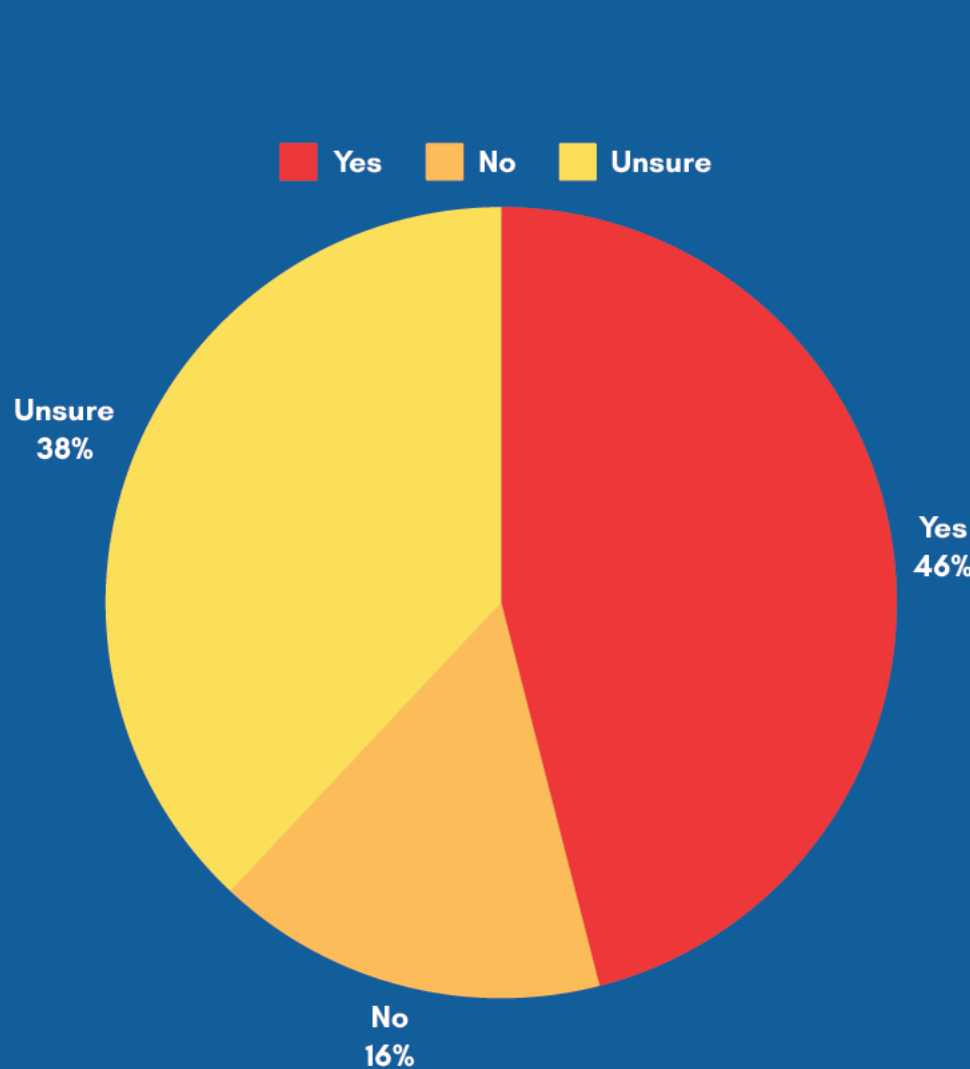
Increased stress due to elevated workloads:



What SCHN Allied Health Professionals Report – The Data

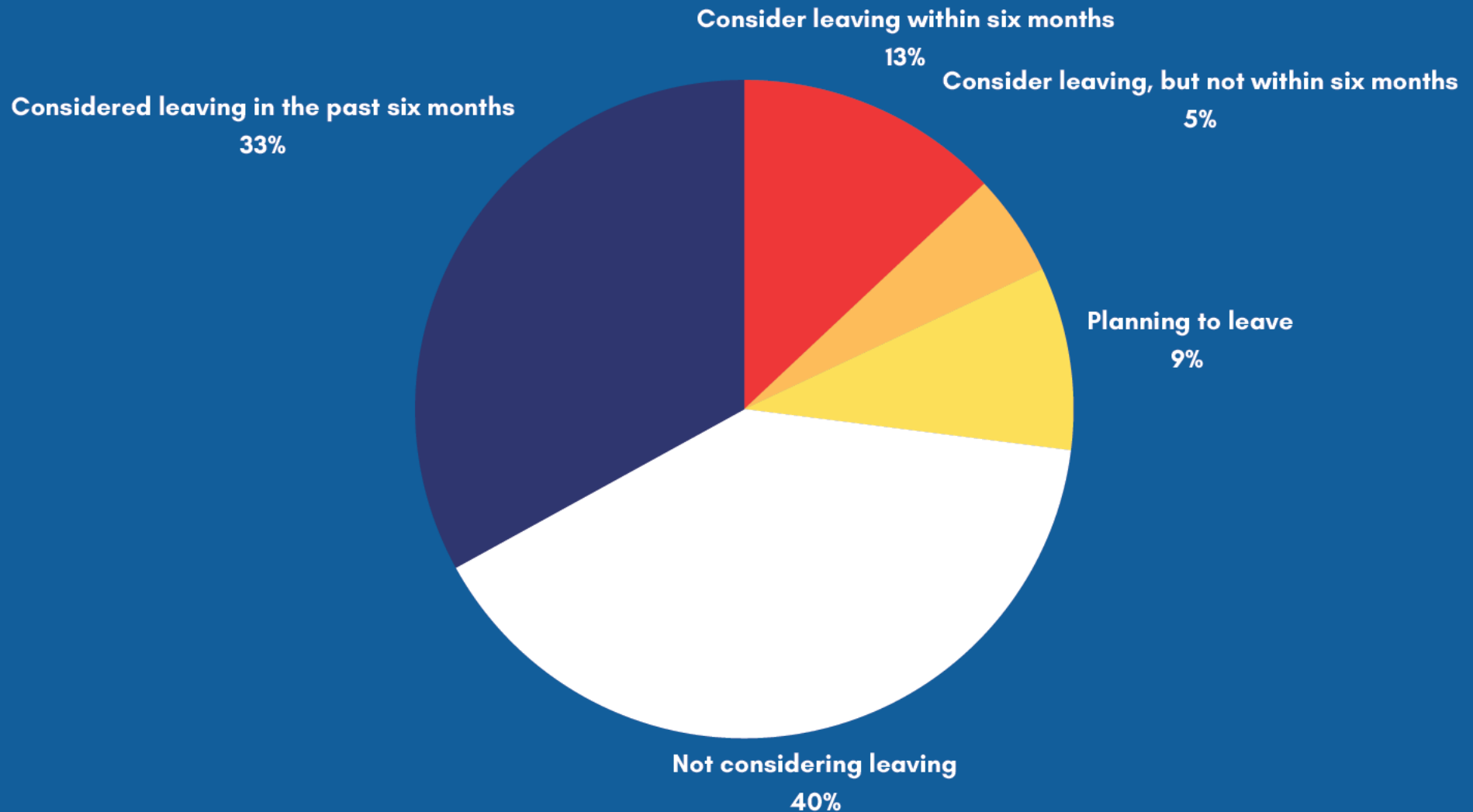
Fear of speaking up:

What will be the key factor in your decision to stay or leave NSW Health?



What SCHN Allied Health Professionals Report – The Data

Job intention:



Critical Gaps in Paediatric Healthcare: Case Studies Highlighting the Impact of Staff Shortages

These case studies illustrate the severe consequences of inadequate staffing across key paediatric health services. From infant feeding difficulties to delayed developmental support, these issues are putting the health and well-being of children at serious risk. Below are five examples of how these shortages are compromising care.

Case Study 1: Inadequate Dietetic Support Leading to Infant Feeding Problems

Infants and young children are being re-admitted repeatedly due to dehydration, electrolyte imbalances and malnutrition. A lack of outpatient dietetic staff means many infants discharged from the NICU with feeding tubes aren't receiving proper follow-up care. As a result, they develop severe oral aversions, become dependent on feeding tubes, and in some cases, require gastrostomy insertions. These children then face years of prolonged feeding therapy to recover.

Case Study 2: Delayed Audiology Testing

Hindering Development

Long waiting lists and limited testing availability are leaving children with suspected permanent hearing loss in limbo. Delays in diagnostic assessments are postponing hearing aid fittings, which stunts speech and language development. Without timely intervention, the effects on a child's development can be profound and long-lasting.

Case Study 3: Medication Review Delays Leading to Dangerous Errors

Children's health is at risk due to prescription errors caused by in-hospital delays in medication reviews. A critical shortage of pharmacy staff means children are not receiving essential medications on time, jeopardising their recovery and well-being.

Case Study 4: Physiotherapy Shortages

Exacerbating Developmental Delays

Children needing developmental assessments during hospital stays often miss out due to severe staff shortages. Many of those who are being seen aren't receiving adequate therapy, causing developmental delays to worsen. This adds pressure to an already overwhelmed outpatient system, depriving children of the safest and most effective care.

Case Study 5: Poison Control Response Delays

Putting Lives at Risk

Significant delays in responding to emergency poison control calls are endangering children. The target is to answer 90% of calls within 60 seconds, but response times can exceed 10 minutes during peak demand. These delays are life-threatening, especially in paediatric poisoning cases where immediate action is crucial.

A message to the Health Minister:

'We are a cohort of passionate, highly skilled professionals unable to provide world-class service due to insufficient staffing.' — Physiotherapist

'We are stressed and exhausted. Our commitment comes at a significant cost to our well-being. Your health system is on the verge of a complete collapse, with catastrophic outcomes for patients.' — Genetic Counsellor

'We give more than we receive, often working through breaks and beyond our shifts. We have reached our limit. Support us with adequate staffing and fair wages to continue delivering exceptional care for children.' — Technical Health Officer

'SCHN leadership has neglected their duty of care to staff. It is now a "Wild West," with only compliant staff remaining. To the Health Minister, I say, "So long, auf wiedersehen, farewell."' — Hospital Scientist

Conclusion

The findings in this report are clear: critical staffing shortages at the Sydney Children's Hospital Network (SCHN) are severely undermining access to essential allied and developmental healthcare for children and young people. It is alarming that one of Australia's leading children's health services is struggling to meet demand. The stark evidence from allied health professionals reveals a system at a breaking point. Inadequate staffing and poor working conditions are leading to inferior health outcomes and increased risks, especially for vulnerable children. The Henry Review of 2020 and numerous other reports have highlighted that the demand for paediatric allied health services is outpacing supply, with the gap growing wider. Urgent action is needed to address these shortages, improve working conditions, and ensure every child receives the timely developmental care they need. Policymakers must act now to prevent further decline and protect the future of children's healthcare in NSW.

As one allied health professional put it, "We face impossible choices every day, forced to prioritise the sickest children at the expense of others who also need our care." Action and reform are critical.

Acknowledgements

HSU extends its sincere gratitude to the delegates and members in allied health at SCHN who generously dedicated their time outside of hours to contribute to the survey and focus group sessions that guided this report.

For further information about this report, contact HSU Division Secretary – Strategy, Research, Projects at [REDACTED]

