



a healthier world through
sonographer expertise

Workforce shortage Australia – FAQs

Why is there a shortage of sonographers?

Medical diagnostic ultrasound is used to diagnose and manage a variety of medical conditions. Across Australia, sonographers perform the majority of medical diagnostic ultrasound examinations.

The need for medical diagnostic ultrasound is increasing exponentially. However, the number of new sonographers coming into the workforce has not kept up with demand. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that more than half of sonographers work in part-time or casual roles with limited capacity to take on additional work, and one-quarter of the workforce is over 50 years of age and approaching retirement.

For over a decade, this workforce shortage has been worsening and is now critical.

The lack of clinical training placements is the most significant barrier to overcoming the shortage. To graduate, it is recommended that student sonographers complete a minimum clinical training of three days per week over a two year period. Most courses require students to identify their placement, commonly provided as an 'employed' position. These positions can be challenging to secure as they rely heavily on the time and resources of supervising sonographers, and present a high financial cost to the employer.

Is Australia the only country with a shortage?

No. The shortage of sonographers is a global issue.

Many countries are facing a similar problem, including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

How significant is the workforce shortage in Australia?

Sonographers are currently listed on the National Skills Priority List as being in national shortage. A 2024 ASA survey of major employers estimates the undersupply to be 20-30% or more. This often results in exam rooms being closed and lengthy delays in services for patients; and additional costs for employers to attract and retain permanent staff, or use locums.

As at December 2023, there were 7,780 Accredited Medical Sonographers in Australia.¹

Demand for ultrasound services continues to grow, influenced by an aging population, and growing application and cost-effectiveness of ultrasound technology.

Left unresolved, the workforce shortage is expected to become exponentially worse, as generations of sonographers begin to retire.

¹ ASAR reported data. December 2023



Is the shortage worse in some areas?

The workforce shortage is an issue across Australia.

It is a particular challenge for many regional and remote communities. Similarly, sonography positions that require discipline-specific skills or additional experience can be challenging to fill.

While it is undoubtedly a challenge for the private sector, where 76% of sonographers are employed, the public sector also faces challenges in attracting and retaining sufficient sonographers.

What are the risks associated with the shortage?

A shortage of sonographers directly affects patient access to timely, quality and comprehensive medical diagnostic ultrasound services.

Patients need access to ultrasound for a range of health services, including pregnancy management, cancer diagnoses, and everything in between. Ultrasound is often a patient's first diagnostic imaging exam, which either eliminates the need for or informs the use of, other more expensive diagnostic imaging.

Delays in accessing ultrasound services can result in avoidable and poor (sometimes catastrophic) health outcomes for the patient and can result in increased costs for the patient and the health system due to having to treat more advanced health conditions.

Is it possible to attract sonographers from overseas?

While a proportion of sonographers working in Australia have been trained overseas, attracting and retaining internationally trained sonographers as a primary solution to the workforce shortage is not viable.

Net migration for medical imaging professionals is very low and is a minor source of new sonographers to the workforce². In the five years to 2023, a total of 88 overseas trained sonographers were approved to practice in Australia. The low net migration is influenced by the fact that the minimum competency expectations of sonographers in Australia are higher than for many other countries. There is also a global shortage of sonographers, which limits the ability to attract overseas trained sonographers to address the local workforce shortage.

What is the ASA doing to help address this problem?

The workforce shortage is a critical issue for ASA members and the wider sector. Work to address the problem is a major priority for the ASA.

The ASA is working with key stakeholders – employers, educators and governments - to fully understand the complexity of the challenge and consider a range of solutions.

Importantly, the ASA continues to advocate Federal and State governments and health departments on behalf of members to seek support for solutions.

² Australian Society of Medical Imaging and Radiation Therapy (ASMIRT) Annual Reports. Available at: <https://www.asmirt.org/news-and-publications/annual-reports/>