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PSNZ Warns Against Negative Impact of Benefit Sanctions on Children's Health

The Paediatric Society of New Zealand (PSNZ) is deeply concerned about the government's proposed benefit sanctions, which could have severe negative effects on the health and wellbeing of tamariki across Aotearoa.

PSNZ believes these changes, which introduce stricter monitoring and penalties for beneficiaries, are ill-considered and based on a harmful neoliberal deficit model that overlooks the real-life consequences for children and their families.

Dr Owen Sinclair (Te Rarawa), President of PSNZ, emphasises the risks, stating, "Our frontline health workers witness the devastating effects of poverty on children's health every day. Poverty is the single biggest cause of poor health in Aotearoa, and these proposed sanctions will only exacerbate these issues. The government's proposal lacks sufficient evidence and fails to consider the disproportionate harm to children, particularly tamariki Māori."

PSNZ also highlights the far-reaching consequences of pushing families deeper into hardship. When families struggle to meet basic needs like nutrition, housing, and healthcare, children are at greater risk of poor health outcomes, including increased illness, developmental delays, and mental health issues. Financial stress can also lead to educational setbacks, as children miss school due to health problems or lack of resources.

Dr Sinclair also questions the broader value of such sanctions, "These sanctions may not provide meaningful benefits and could be a misallocation of resources. Addressing larger systemic issues like tax evasion would likely yield greater financial benefits. If we truly want to improve society and reduce inequities, we should focus on solutions that address the root causes of poverty rather than punitive measures that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable."

PSNZ also expresses deep concern about the harmful and dehumanising narratives that these sanctions reinforce. "These sanctions perpetuate a narrative rooted in individualism and meritocracy, which suggests that people in poverty are solely responsible for their situation. The majority of families on a benefit are simply doing their best to get by, often having faced difficult circumstances that led them to seek support. They are not calculating malingers but rather people who have come upon hard times with legitimate reasons for needing assistance. It is crucial to remember that their tamariki should not be further disadvantaged by policies that stigmatise and marginalise their families." Dr Sinclair noted.

"Tamariki in Aotearoa flourish in health and wellness"

To shift the narrative and promote more effective solutions, PSNZ advocates for a compassionate and just welfare system that supports self-determination, addresses the structural causes of poverty and prioritises children's health and well-being.

"Most of us believe in a welfare system that is fair and compassionate," Dr Sinclair said. "By framing poverty as a result of systemic constraints rather than personal failings, we can create policies that genuinely help people move forward, rather than locking them into cycles of deprivation."

The Paediatric Society urges the government to reconsider these proposals and instead focus on evidence-based approaches that address the root causes of poverty and support the health and wellbeing of all children in Aotearoa.

Contact:

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