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Push for health check on trade deal before NZ signs up

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Ruth Brown

It's a race against time to get traction on the idea of an independent health assessment of the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, public health doctor and researcher Rhys Jones says.

Trade minister Tim Groser is suggesting the agreement might be signed early next year, so the time frame is tight for getting an independent health assessment done and its findings publicly discussed, Dr Jones says.

The co-convenor of OraTaiao, Dr Jones was one of the authors of a paper prepared on behalf of health organisations, calling for health experts to [assess the impact of the TPPA](#).

The paper [garnered support from the NZMA](#), among others, when it was published at nzdoctor.co.nz yesterday.

In a media release, NZMA chair Mark Peterson says, “We need to have a [clear understanding of the possible effects of the TPPA](#) on current and future policy settings and directions—before we are committed to such a deal.”

[link to yesterday’s media release]

The paper’s authors wrote to Mr Groser and health minister Jonathan Coleman last Thursday seeking the assessment, but have so far had no reply.

But Dr Jones says he is encouraged by the support from the NZMA and the recent media interest. He hopes the deadline will again be pushed out to allow time to pursue the initiative and raise public awareness.

Much more than a trade deal

“[The TPPA has] been labelled a trade deal but it’s so much more than that,” he says.

“Part of the issue is that, although it’s somewhat in the future and some of the implications might be a little bit hypothetical, we have examples of similar types of trade agreements that substantiate our concerns,” he says.

“My sense is that, if New Zealanders fully understood the implications there would be much more of an outcry against it.”

Alcohol Healthwatch director Rebecca Williams said in a media release yesterday leaked information suggested that “investor state dispute settlement” and [“technical barriers to trade” clauses were part of the negotiations](#).

“Such clauses could leave countries like New Zealand wide open to litigious action by giant international corporates such as the alcohol industry, if health legislation was put in place that threatens their trade,” she says.

Ten health bodies sign up

The 10 health organisations that signed the paper are looking for a multidisciplinary evaluation of the impact on New Zealand’s health system by a team of experts.

The signatories are members of OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council, NZ Nurses Organisation, NZ College of Midwives, Alcohol Healthwatch, Alcohol Action, NZ Medical Students Association, Smokefree Coalition, Medical Students for Global Awareness and the College of Nurses.

Yesterday's article follows on from an open letter, [signed by 270 health professionals](#), sent to prime minister John Key in May expressing serious concerns about the health effects of the proposed trade agreement.

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