



Australian
College of
Nursing

Voice of influence

The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Minister for Health and Medical Research
House of Representatives
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Dear Minister

Response to the *Review of Australian Health Workforce Programs, April 2013*

Australian College of Nursing (ACN) welcomed the publication of the final report of the *Review of Australian Government Health Workforce Programs* (the Review). Representatives from ACN were pleased to participate in several of the stakeholder consultations that informed the Review held in late 2012, specifically the Scholarships, National Health Education and Nursing Workforce roundtables.

ACN has considered the Review and prepared a response reflecting our views in relation to its themes and many of its recommendations. Please find enclosed the response for your reference and consideration.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or discussion on this matter.

Yours sincerely

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Chief Executive Officer

10 July 2013

Australian College of Nursing Response to *Review of Australian Health Workforce Programs, April 2013*

Australian College of Nursing (ACN) has welcomed the *Review of Australian Government Health Workforce Programs* (the Review) as a necessary course for strategic health workforce planning in the broader context of Australian health care reform. The effectiveness of Australian Government funded health workforce programs impacts the outcomes of health reform measures at all jurisdictional levels. To this end, setting sound national policy directions for health workforce funding and investment is paramount for maintaining and improving Australian health care into the future. This is particularly important for nurse workforce planning given the scale of nurse workforce shortages projected for the medium and longer term.

ACN provides the following response to the tabling of the Review.

Overarching comments

The Review's overarching themes and underpinning assumptions generally align with ACN views and expectations of how the Australian health system needs to evolve to ensure its future sustainability.

ACN supports the Review's principles that:

- The primary purpose of health workforce programs is to meet the health care needs of the community.
- It is an economic imperative that health resources are redirected to population health initiatives and preventative health care.
- Generalist skills and multidisciplinary team-based community health care and education should be fostered as part of a broader shift away from a specialist medicine focused health system model.
- The further development of the nursing and allied health workforces is an economic and population health imperative.

ACN believes the Review has captured and considered many of the primary matters of concern relating to nurse workforce planning and we welcome the underpinning assumption within the Review that current and future nurse workforce shortages and capacity issues will not be addressed through increasing workforce supply only. ACN agrees with the position of the Review that securing a future nurse workforce of appropriate size and responsiveness will be dependent on multiple workforce strategies focused on retention and capability development, not simply an increase in supply. The following section provides ACN's responses to the various recommendations directly or indirectly impacting the provision of nursing services indicating where support is offered for particular recommendations and where support is reserved.

ACN responses to recommendations

Chapter 3: Ensuring a capable and qualified health workforce

Recommendation 3.1 - The Standing Council of Health (SCoH) should engage with professional boards to develop more consistent requirements for continuing professional development, recency of practice and re-entry to practice

ACN support reserved

While ACN is not opposed to dialogue between the Commonwealth via the Standing Council of Health and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia in relation to the profession's continuing professional development, recency of practice and re-entry requirements, ACN cautions against any

moves that would encourage or result in the diminishing of current nursing registration standards or the independence of the profession to define these standards. ACN acknowledges that nurse re-entry requirements present a particular set of challenges for some and agrees that supports for nurse re-entry should continue to be considered. ACN also notes that the availability of online access to re-entry has improved since the Review work commenced which assists those in more regional and remote locations. However, focusing on the reduction of education requirements for re-entry could place unnecessary risk on quality and safety and must be thoroughly examined.

Recommendation 3.2 - The SCoH should bring forward options for a common legislative framework for prescribing by non-medical health professionals

ACN supports this recommendation

There is untapped potential and scope to use nursing skills and knowledge in prescribing medication to make better use of scarce health resources and to potentially improve medication and disease management (ACT Health 2007). Registered nurses (who are not nurse practitioners) in many health care settings can currently prescribe medications under pre-set protocols and/or standing orders within differing legislative frameworks. A suitably designed common legislative framework for prescribing of medicines by non-medical health professionals could provide better foundations for nursing service innovation and increase scope for nurse prescribing and reduce national variability.

Recommendation 3.4 - The Commonwealth should continue to invest in clinical training initiatives, including the clinical aspects of undergraduate training

ACN supports this recommendation

Continued investment in clinical training initiatives must also include investment to improve the quality of clinical training experiences for nurses and be extended to include postgraduate education where appropriate. ACN offers support for further innovation in this area including inter-professional learning and investment in simulated learning environments.

Recommendation 3.5 - A new focus on collaboration between organisations involved in health education needs to be mandated

ACN support reserved

ACN supports future collaboration between health care organisations and education providers specifically regarding funding arrangements for clinical placement.

While in support of the recommendation's concept, ACN is not in support of mandating collaboration. Furthermore, the implications for education providers of the proposal to embed key performance indicators within each initiative needs further canvassing.

Recommendation 3.6 - The Commonwealth and Health Workforce Australia should engage more closely with the private health sector in developing and implementing health training initiatives

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN is in support of this proposal to better engage the private health sector in the development and implementation of health education training initiatives. It is incumbent upon private sector service providers to contribute to the professional development and training of the health professionals they employ and their greater engagement could significantly increase training and education capacity within the sector. Whilst the nursing profession utilises private health providers to some extent, it is recognised that there is greater potential for their more effective and active engagement in education initiatives for nurses. Such engagement should not be limited to private hospitals but also include such settings as day surgeries; procedural rooms; Medicare Locals and GP practices to broaden the opportunities.

Recommendation 3.11 - A detailed mapping of each of the health workforce scholarship schemes should be undertaken, including an analysis of administrative costs and the financial and other value of the scholarships

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN supports the Review's recommendation that an evaluation of the financial and other value provided by health workforce scholarship schemes should be undertaken.

Recommendation 3.12 - The Commonwealth should develop a health workforce scholarship internet portal

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN offers support for the development of a health workforce scholarship internet portal as an additional resource, not as a replacement for existing information and resources.

Recommendation 3.13 - The Commonwealth needs to develop measurable health workforce objectives for all scholarship schemes and embed agreed outcomes in program contracting, reporting and evaluation

ACN support reserved

ACN agrees that better alignment of scholarship schemes and health workforce objectives would be beneficial, and ACN would support a move towards embedding agreed health workforce outcomes in relation to scholarship program contracting, reporting and evaluation. However, ACN also notes that assessing scholarship schemes against workforce objectives will present some significant reporting challenges particularly in relation to quantifiable measures and would need to be taken over a long term to truly assess the impact.

Recommendation 3.14 - Detailed workforce data analysis needs to be undertaken to determine where scholarship funding may be most efficiently targeted to achieve workforce distribution objectives

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN would support a thorough analysis of the effectiveness of scholarship programs in relation to workforce objectives. ACN would anticipate that such an evaluation would include qualitative data from scholarship recipients (including their long-term career intentions) as well as quantitative measures.

Recommendation 3.15 - The Commonwealth should consider whether continued investment in the Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship (MRBS) represents value for money. Any money released from the MRBS should be redirected towards the Rural Australia Medical Undergraduate Scholarship (RAMUS) Scheme and to the Nursing and Allied Health Scholarship and Support Scheme (NAHSSS) rural scholarships for allied health students

ACN supports this recommendation

If an evaluation of the Medical Rural Bonded Scholarship (MRBS) Scheme finds that it does not represent value for money, ACN would support the re-direction of some of the funds towards the Nursing and Allied Health Scholarship and Support Scheme (NAHSSS). In light of projected nursing workforce shortages in rural areas, ACN would like to see some of this funding redirected towards rural nursing scholarships. This would go some way towards addressing inequities and inefficiencies in the allocation of rural health workforce scholarship funding.

Recommendation 3.16 - The Commonwealth should undertake further policy analysis of possible models for consolidation of health workforce scholarship schemes within professional groups

ACN support reserved

ACN supports the consolidation of health workforce scholarship schemes within professional groups and the streamlining of reporting arrangements. However, as significant streamlining has already been undertaken for nursing scholarships, ACN has reservations about the value of further consolidation at this stage.

Recommendation 3.17 - The Commonwealth should consider changing the focus of its nursing scholarship funding towards postgraduate scholarships that are responsive to identified nursing workforce retention needs

ACN support reserved

ACN offers conditional support for a shift towards focusing nursing scholarship funding on postgraduate education, however, it is essential that this does not result in the reduction of funding for nursing scholarships overall. ACN strongly believes that postgraduate education is the appropriate vehicle for the provision of speciality area education in areas such as mental health, aged care and palliative care. Consideration also needs to be given to smaller speciality areas. While specialities such as stoma therapy represent a small proportion of the nursing workforce, shortages in these areas are of critical importance for service delivery.

Chapter 4: Addressing health workforce shortages in regional, rural and remote Australia

Recommendation 4.2 - The Commonwealth should consider opportunities for building rural training pathways in allied health, dentistry and nursing

ACN supports this recommendation

Recommendation 4.5 - The Rural Clinical Training and Support (RCTS) program should expand its focus on supporting multidisciplinary training placements

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN supports the extension of the Rural Clinical Training and Support program to nursing which would assist organisations in placing students in rural sectors.

Recommendation 4.9 - Any extension of a comprehensive rural training program to cover nursing, allied health and dentistry should be supported by the collection of longitudinal outcomes reporting

ACN supports this recommendation

Recommendation 4.17 - The Commonwealth should consider expanding the Rural Health Continuing Education (RHCE) program

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN would strongly support the continuance and expansion of the Rural Health Continuing Education (RHCE) program. Access to adequate funding for professional development is a significant issue for nurses working in rural and remote Australia. Providing increased funding would assist in ensuring that the rural nursing workforce remains highly skilled and flexible, as well potentially improving retention.

Chapter 5: Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health workforce capacity

Recommendation 5.8 - The Commonwealth should consider options for the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery Policy Advisor within one of the nursing peak bodies

ACN support reserved

ACN suggests that with the recent changes made at CATSIN that this recommendation be reconsidered or held over at this time. CATSIN is the primary voice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nursing and Midwifery issues and other nursing and midwifery organisations in many cases work closely with CATSIN on issues as required. While ACN can see the benefit for a peak nursing organisation in having such a role within it there would be a need to ensure that the role works closely with CATSIN to ensure that there is consistency for the profession more broadly. If established the role should be properly resourced and located within an organisation with sufficient organisational capacity and policy development experience to support the advisor.

Chapter 7: Nursing and midwifery workforce – education, retention and sustainability

Recommendation 7.1 - The Commonwealth should work with the profession to establish a National Nursing and Midwifery Education Advisory Network (NNMEAN)

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN would support the establishment of a National Nursing and Midwifery Education Advisory Network with the expectation that nursing stakeholders will be consulted on the establishment and membership of the Network.

Recommendation 7.2 - As part of the NNMEAN work, an appropriate organisation should be tasked with identifying and analysing the issues related to a perceived reluctance by employers to employ newly graduated nurses

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN agrees that a thorough analysis of the issues relating to the perceived reluctance of employers to employ graduate nurses is necessary. It is ACN's position that better communication between employers and education providers about what are the appropriate expectations of a first year nursing graduate is also needed as part of this investigation. An analysis of this mismatch in expectations should be undertaken, and effective strategies to address identified issues identified.

Recommendation 7.3 - The Commonwealth should consider providing seed funding for a feasibility study of a national rollout of leadership courses for mid-level nurse and midwife managers based on the New South Wales Essentials of Care Program

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN is in strong support of a Commonwealth-funded feasibility study of a national roll out of the successful Essentials of Care Program. As noted in the Report, such a program would complement Health Workforce Australia's work program and in particular its work on Health Leads. As the nation's key professional nursing body, ACN is well positioned to lead this work. The ACN leadership is experienced in the development and delivery of transformational practice development programs such as Essentials of Care.

Recommendation 7.4 - The Commonwealth should consider providing flexible financial support under the Nursing and Allied Health Scholarship and Support Scheme (NAHSSS) for supervised re-entry courses for registered nurses in regional, rural and remote locations

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN strongly supports flexible funding arrangements for re-entry courses for nurses seeking to re-enter the workforce after an extended period of absence. ACN notes the difficulties for rural and remote nurses to access these programs particularly when family and employment commitments prohibit them from being away from their local area. ACN believes the Commonwealth should also give consideration to strategies other than scholarships to improve accessibility in rural areas such as support for modes of delivery that improve access for those resident in more remote and regional areas.

Recommendation 7.5 - The Commonwealth should continue its investment in the Practice Nursing Incentive Program (PNIP) but the Nursing in General Practice Program (NiGP) should be integrated with the activities of Medicare Locals

ACN support reserved

ACN is not in support of redirecting NiGP funds into the activities of Medicare Locals. While greater local level engagement with the nursing services provided within general practice could result in very positive service and care innovation, ACN is not yet confident that Medicare Locals currently have the required capability and organisational cultures to adequately foster the development of new initiatives to promote nursing roles in the primary health sector. Furthermore, the roles and reach of practice nurses are generally limited to individuals or groups who attend their practices, ideally the funds should be directed towards nursing activity that has a much greater population impact. ACN recommends the funds be retained within the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing and be redirected to a national program aimed at examining and developing community and primary health care nursing service models to promote better overall service integration and improve access to services to those groups that do not routinely utilise the services of a general practitioner.

Recommendation 7.6 - The Commonwealth should develop a model based on the Remote Vocational Training Scheme (RVTS) model to allow distance education and supervision

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN strongly supports the development of distance education and supervision models for nurses working in remote areas.

Recommendation 7.7 - The Commonwealth agencies involved in nursing education need to investigate the availability and cost of VET sector training as it relates to enrolled nurses

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN agrees that enrolled nurses are a vital part of the nursing workforce in Australia and that the high cost of some Diploma programs is in need of review.

Recommendation 7.8 - The Commonwealth should undertake an analysis of activity in countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada, where enrolled nurse positions and training have been reduced or removed entirely

ACN supports this recommendation

ACN believes that enrolled nurses are a necessary and cost-effective part of the nursing workforce in Australia. ACN would expect that such an analysis would consider all the impacts of the reduction of enrolled nurse positions, including any shifts towards relying on unlicensed care workers.

References

ACT Health 2007, 'Setting the scene for non-medical prescribing in Australia and the ACT', *ACT Health interprofessional learning project non-medical prescribing briefing notes*. Unpublished manuscript, Canberra.