



Australian College of Nursing

PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION

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Foreword

Nurses: the solution to improving access to health care

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Australia is currently navigating a period of significant health system reform being driven by the Australian Government. Through initiatives such as *Strengthening Medicare*, we have witnessed critical reviews, including the *Review of General Practice Incentives*, the *Review of After-Hours Primary Care Programs and Policy*, the *Working Better for Medicare Review*, and the *Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of Practice Review*. Recent reforms, such as the endorsement for suitably qualified Registered Nurses to prescribe medicines in partnership with authorised health practitioners demonstrates Australia's commitment to improving health care access, addressing gaps in rural and remote areas, and enhancing care coordination and efficiency.

While some reforms have progressed, others remain awaiting a formal Government response. The *Scope of Practice Review* stands out as offering the most transformative potential to improve access to health care for all Australians.

The *Scope of Practice Review's* recommendations propose overdue reforms that empower nurses, nurse practitioners, and midwives to work to their full scope of practice, enhancing access to quality health services irrespective of geographic location or socioeconomic status.

Key proposals include blended payments to enable multidisciplinary care, bundled maternity care payments, and direct referral pathways for allied health professionals, midwives, nurse practitioners, and remote area nurses.

The evidence is clear: enabling nurses, nurse practitioners, and midwives to work to their full scope benefits patients, communities, and the healthcare system at large. Vulnerable populations, including rural, remote, and First Nations communities, stand to gain the most from these reforms. With nurses comprising 54% of Australia's health workforce and being the most geographically dispersed, it is time to leverage their skills fully.

Nurse-led care has proven successful in Australia for decades. Recent expansions, such as the introduction of more nurse-led walk-in clinics, highlight their popularity with patients for being accessible and high-quality, as well as their effectiveness in relieving pressure on general practice and emergency departments.

But this is just the start.

“The evidence is clear: enabling nurses, nurse practitioners, and midwives to work to their full scope benefits patients, communities, and the healthcare system at large”

In this *Pre-Budget Submission*, the Australian College of Nursing (ACN) outlines practical and affordable solutions across five key areas:

1. **Elevating the image of nursing:** Showcasing the vital contributions of nurses across the healthcare continuum to address workforce shortages, improve public perception, and build a stronger pipeline of future nurses.
2. **Strengthening nurse-led models of care:** Enhancing access to nurse-led services through modernised funding models, expanded referral pathways, and scalable solutions that improve healthcare accessibility and alleviate pressure on primary and acute care services.
3. **Maximising nursing workforce capability:** Providing lifelong learning opportunities, standardising recognition of skills through a National Nursing Capability Passport, enhancing digital proficiency, and preparing nurses to deliver care across specialised areas, including aged care and home-based services.
4. **Enabling the practice environment:** Creating supportive environments for nurses through initiatives like clinical supervision, transition-to-retirement strategies, and tailored solutions for rural and remote areas, ensuring equitable and sustainable access to quality care.
5. **Cultivating nurse leadership:** Developing mentorship frameworks and leadership programs to empower nurses at all levels to drive innovation, improve workforce retention, and deliver exceptional healthcare outcomes.

As the *Peak Nursing and Midwifery* campaign states, nurses are **Safe, Trusted, Skilled, Experienced, and Underutilised**. Education, across the nursing career continuum, remains at the core of our advocacy to ensure a workforce that meets the health demands of a growing and ageing population with increasingly complex needs.

This submission offers a framework for governments to invest in and support nurses, nursing and the health system, empowering nurses to provide culturally safe, patient-centred care across multiple settings. From rural and remote areas to specialised fields such as aged care, palliative care, and mental health, nurses are uniquely positioned to lead Australia’s healthcare future.

We have said it before and will keep saying it: **Nurses are the Solution.**





CASE STUDY

Sarah has been a registered nurse for over 20 years and has worked in a variety of settings—emergency departments, rural clinics, and even in-home care. Her experience is invaluable, and yet, in recent years, Sarah has begun to feel the weight of the profession in ways she never has before.

At 44, Sarah has reached a point in her career where she has seen many colleagues become disillusioned and leave the profession, some retiring early, others leaving to pursue different careers. For Sarah, the idea of leaving has become increasingly tempting. The burnout is real. She finds herself drained at the end of every shift, emotionally exhausted and physically spent. The demands are relentless, and the hours are long, often bleeding into time meant for family and self-care.

But what weighs most heavily on Sarah is the feeling of being underutilised. Despite her years of experience, she often finds herself working at a fraction of her potential. She knows that she has the skills and expertise to lead teams, manage patient care plans, and offer support to junior healthcare staff—but the scope of her practice is limited, and this has begun to chip away at her passion for nursing. Sarah often wishes she had access to a mentor or clinical supervisor who could provide guidance, emotional support, and opportunities for professional reflection, helping her navigate the challenges of rural nursing and reignite her passion for a career she once deeply loved.

As a nurse in a rural area, Sarah is acutely aware of the shortage of healthcare professionals. She has witnessed firsthand how the lack of access to other health care specialists in the area means that nurses like her often take on more, yet without the autonomy to fully utilise their skills. She has also seen the toll on patients who must travel long distances to access specialised care, with many deteriorating significantly due to delays in treatment. Sarah's frustration grows as she watches younger nurses come in, eager and hopeful, only to face the same barriers she has experienced, resulting in considering other opportunities.

Sarah wonders what the future holds for nurses like her—skilled, experienced, but stuck in a system that does not allow them to reach their full potential. She knows that healthcare reform is needed but she wonders if change will come soon enough to make a difference for nurses like herself. For now, Sarah holds on, hoping for a future where nurses are seen as the solution they truly are, empowered to provide the best care possible, and supported in every aspect of their professional lives.

Summary of recommendations

In the 2024–25 Federal Budget, ACN recommends that the Australian Government invest in targeted initiatives and establish robust policy frameworks to strengthen the nursing profession.

Elevating the image of nursing

Promoting the value of nursing

Recommendation:

- Collaborate with States and Territories to invest \$15 million in a **national multimedia campaign to promote the image of nursing**.

Rationale:

By investing in nursing, the Government can reduce strain on the healthcare system, enable more proactive healthcare delivery, through recruitment and retention of workforce and in turn build healthier communities. A comparable campaign for teaching in late 2023 achieved these objectives for education; it is time to make the same commitment to nursing.

Strengthening nurse-led models of care

Expanding nurse-led services

Recommendations:

- **Review and modernise funding models for nurse-led services**, including blended funding, activity-based hospital funding, and Medicare-based remuneration, to support nurses practising autonomously within their full scope of practice.
- Invest \$10 million to **develop a business case demonstrating the outcomes of nurse-led services** and the evaluation of a blended funding model ensuring these services are scalable and sustainable.

Rationale:

Empowering nurses through nurse-led services will, improve healthcare accessibility, alleviate GP workload, and promote preventive care, ultimately strengthening Australia's healthcare system.

Maximising nursing capability

Supporting lifelong learning

Recommendations:

- **Develop and implement a National Nurses Capability Passport**, as recommended in the Scope of Practice Review, to standardise the recognition of nurses' qualifications and skills, ensuring workforce mobility and flexibility.
- Invest in a **nationally recognised framework to support lifelong learning and skills acquisition**, providing clear and accessible career pathways for nurses.
- Allocate \$2.5 million over three years **to fund scholarships that enable nurses to undertake continuing professional development (CPD) and specialised education** aligned with their career progression.

Rationale:

These measures will ensure nurses have access to the resources and opportunities they need to meet professional development requirements, advance their careers, retain experienced practitioners, and deliver higher-quality care to all Australians.

Building digital proficiency

Recommendations:

- Invest \$3 million **in program funding and scholarships to advance digital and virtual literacy education** for nurses.
- **Expand nurse access to My Health Record** to improve system operability, reduce missed data, and enable seamless care coordination.
- **Broaden the availability of direct referrals** through Medicare or other mechanisms, allowing appropriately qualified nurses to facilitate timely care and referrals to specialist services.

Rationale:

Investing in nurses' digital capacity will enable them to harness modern technologies and reduce system fragmentation, ultimately ensuring better health outcomes through improved access to care for all Australians.

Enhancing nursing to facilitate ageing in place

Recommendations:

- **Allocate \$2 million** to develop specialised Home Aged Care Nursing Services education.
- **Invest \$52 million over three years** to fund 5,000 education scholarships in Home Care Aged Care Nursing services.

Rationale:

These measures will ensure that Australia's nursing workforce is empowered to provide comprehensive, person-centred care for older Australians, supporting the goals of the new Aged Care Act and strengthening nurse capability in the aged care sector.

Supporting retirement transitions

Recommendations:

- Invest \$4 million to develop and implement a **National Transition to Retirement Guide for nurses**, providing organisations with strategies to retain experienced nurses through flexible retirement options.
- **Review age pension rulings** to increase the secondary income limit for high-need professions, such as nursing, enabling retiring nurses to remain in the workforce without financial disincentives.

Rationale:

By creating a clear career pathway that includes transition-to-retirement options, the Government can retain the expertise of older nurses, reduce workforce shortages, and ensure a sustainable, skilled healthcare system.

Navigating perimenopause and menopause

Recommendations:

- Invest \$5 million in a **national campaign to raise awareness about the impacts of perimenopause and menopause** in the nursing workforce.
- Allocate \$3 million to **develop and deliver an online perimenopause and menopause education program for nurses**, incorporating a train-the-trainer approach.

Rationale:

These measures will ensure the nursing profession is equipped to address the challenges of menopause, enabling affected nurses to maintain their quality of life and extend their careers. With nurses being the most geographically dispersed health professionals, providing care across the lifespan and in diverse settings, these initiatives will strengthen their ability to deliver high-quality, person-centred care, benefiting women and communities more broadly.

Enabling the practice environment

Embedding clinical supervision

Recommendation:

- Develop and implement a Nationally Consistent Framework to provide all nurses with **free and accessible clinical supervision**.

Rationale:

By investing in clinical supervision, the Government can enhance the wellbeing of the nursing workforce, improve retention rates, and strengthen the delivery of safe, high-quality care across Australia.

Empowering rural and remote opportunities

Recommendations:

- Invest \$50 million to **establish coordinator positions within rural and remote health services** to support nurses and student nurses.
- Assist universities and nursing education providers in **adapting metropolitan nursing curriculums for delivery in rural and remote contexts**, ensuring consistency in education and fostering locally appropriate solutions.

Rationale:

These measures would create a supportive practice environment, enhance the quality of nursing education in rural areas, and build a pipeline of locally trained nurses committed to serving rural and remote communities. This initiative would secure the future of healthcare services closer to home, in these regions while positioning rural nursing as an attractive and viable career pathway.

Cultivating nurse leadership

Building mentorship programs

Recommendations:

- Invest in developing a **Mentoring Capability Framework** tailored to the nursing profession to standardise mentorship practices and improve the transition experience for new graduate nurses.
- Fund the development of a **Nurse Mentor Preparation Course** to equip experienced nurses with the skills to effectively mentor early-career professionals.

Rationale:

A strong mentorship framework will enhance career pathways, support the transition into the workforce, and foster a culture of professional growth and retention, ultimately strengthening Australia's nursing workforce and improving patient outcomes.

Advancing nurse leaders

Recommendations:

- **Invest \$500,000** to support and **enhance leadership skills for nurses** through the completion of dedicated nurse leadership courses through ACN's Institute of Leadership.
- Partner with ACN's Institute of Leadership to develop and implement a **specialised leadership program tailored to the needs of Aged Care Nurse Leaders**.

Rationale:

By strengthening nurse leadership, the Government can ensure a healthcare system led by strategic and innovative leaders equipped to address modern challenges. Specifically, leadership programs for Aged Care Nurse Leaders will enhance team performance, improve care quality and safety, and foster person-centred approaches, directly benefiting vulnerable older Australians. This investment will empower nurse leaders to drive positive change and deliver exceptional aged care services.



Elevating the image of nursing

Promoting the value of nursing

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ACN calls on the Australian Government to collaborate with States and Territories to invest \$15 million in a **national multimedia campaign to elevate the image of nursing**.

This campaign should:

- Showcase the vital contributions nurses make to health care and communities.
- Highlight the diversity of nursing roles, settings, and career pathways.
- Attract new nurses, retain the current workforce, and re-engage former nurses.

By investing in nursing, the Government can reduce strain on the healthcare system, enable more proactive healthcare delivery, and build healthier communities. A comparable campaign for teaching in late 2023 achieved these objectives for education; it is time to make the same commitment to nursing.

THE ISSUE

Nurses and midwives are the largest segment of Australia's healthcare workforce, with 391,241 registered in 2023.¹ Despite this, an ageing population, rising chronic disease, growing mental health needs, and overall population growth are placing increasing pressure on the nursing profession; The image of nursing has changed from a 'caring and calm' healthcare professional, to a 'caring but stressed' healthcare professional.²

If we do not act, Australia could face a shortage of 70,707 full-time nurses by 2035, threatening the sustainability of our health system.³

“Nurses and midwives are the largest segment of Australia’s healthcare workforce, with 391,241 registered in 2023”

THE SOLUTION

A refreshed, contemporary, and diverse image of nursing is crucial to attracting new nurses, retaining existing ones, and re-engaging those who have left the profession. While the public holds a positive perception of nursing, being the second most trusted profession in Australia⁴, increasing their understanding of the full scope of our practice will ensure they fully benefit from our expertise. The *Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce: Scope of Practice Review*⁵ highlights the poor understanding that consumers and healthcare professionals have of nursing scope of practice, consequently impeding clarity of roles, interprofessional trust, and quality and accessibility of care. Promoting the image of nursing should be closely linked to the Government’s first primary care workforce campaign.⁶ A positive image of nursing campaign should emphasise promoting all primary healthcare professions as dynamic, diverse, and rewarding career choices.

A national campaign—similar to the Australian Government’s 2023 teacher recruitment campaign—should showcase the many career opportunities in nursing and midwifery, spanning a broad range of specialties and locations. This approach will help modernise the public’s perception of nursing, highlight the critical contribution nurses and midwives make, and illustrate the diverse pathways available within the profession. Telling the real stories of nurses and midwives will emphasise how their work underpins a safe and sustainable healthcare system. By linking a positive image of nursing to the Government’s first primary care workforce campaign, we can strengthen public confidence and ensure nursing is seen as an appealing career.

Implementing recommendations from the *National Nursing Workforce Strategy*⁷, our suggested campaign would harmonise the value and perception of nurses within the profession and the community. Investing in a comprehensive media campaign can build a strong pipeline of future nurses and midwives and retain the nurses we have, ensuring Australia’s healthcare system is safe and sustainable.

Strengthening nurse-led models of care

Expanding nurse-led services

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Review and modernise funding models** for nurse-led services, including blended funding, activity-based hospital funding, and Medicare-based remuneration, to support nurses practicing autonomously within their full scope of practice.
- Invest \$10 million to **develop a business case demonstrating the outcomes of nurse-led services** and the evaluation of a blended funding model ensuring these services are scalable and sustainable.

Empowering nurses through nurse-led services will improve healthcare accessibility, alleviate GP workload, and promote preventive care, ultimately strengthening Australia's healthcare system.

THE ISSUE

Australia's rising cost of living and increasing demand for healthcare services are creating significant barriers to accessing care. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 45.6% of people needing a GP waited more than 24 hours for an urgent appointment, while 19.3% could not attend due to cost.⁸

Nurse-led services offer an innovative solution to ensure affordable and accessible health care, particularly in primary care. However, current funding models are restrictive and prohibitive.⁹ The *Scope of Practice Review*¹⁰ identifies insufficient subsidisation and outdated regulations—such as requiring GP supervision for certain services¹¹—as key barriers preventing nurses from practicing to their full scope of practice. This limitation reduces the potential of multidisciplinary teams and restricts healthcare access for Australians.

“Expanding the scope of practice for nurse practitioners, registered nurses and remote area nurses—including direct referrals and expanded prescribing rights—would alleviate GP burdens and empower multidisciplinary teams”

THE SOLUTION

Nurses make up the largest sector of Australia’s healthcare workforce and are uniquely positioned to provide high-quality, accessible care through nurse-led services.¹² Internationally, the International Council of Nurses has advocated for nurse-led models as central to strengthening health systems, stating “nurse-led services should be central to expanding and strengthening health systems worldwide”.¹³

The *Scope of Practice Review, recommendation 9*, highlights the need for further research into innovative workforce models, such as nurse-led clinics¹⁴, and the development of modern funding mechanisms to support them¹⁵. Expanding the scope of practice for nurse practitioners, registered nurses and remote area nurses—including direct referrals and expanded prescribing rights—would alleviate GP burdens and empower multidisciplinary teams.

Modernising funding models, such as blended funding or expanding available Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS item numbers, would enable nurses to deliver preventive health care and reduce overall pressure and costs in the healthcare system.¹⁶ While the new prescribing changes represent progress, further implementation of recommendations from the *Scope of Practice Review*, such as enabling direct referrals from nurse practitioners and remote area nurses, is essential. A business case demonstrating the effectiveness and sustainability of nurse-led services remains critical to advancing these reforms.

Furthermore, expanding nurses’ capacity to make direct referrals through Medicare or other mechanisms would facilitate appropriate care provision within nurse-led models. This would empower not only nurse practitioners but also appropriately qualified registered nurses to make timely referrals, thereby improving access to care and supporting better health outcomes across the population.

Maximising nursing workforce capability

Supporting lifelong learning

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- Develop and implement a National Nursing Capability Passport, as recommended in the Scope of Practice Review, to standardise the recognition of nurses' qualifications and training, ensuring workforce mobility and flexibility.
- Invest in supporting ACN develop a nationally recognised framework to support lifelong learning and skills acquisition, providing clear and accessible career pathways for nurses.
- Allocates **\$2.5 million over three years** to fund scholarships that enable nurses to undertake CPD and specialised education aligned with their career progression.

These measures will ensure nurses have access to the resources and opportunities they need to meet professional development requirements, advance their careers, and deliver high-quality care to all Australians.

THE ISSUE

Nurses are required to undertake mandatory CPD hours annually, ranging from 20 to 50 hours depending on their qualifications.¹⁷ However, unlike their medical counterparts, nurses often face inequitable access to financial support and release from the workplace to meet these requirements. Programs like the Rural Procedural Grants Program¹⁸ for procedural GPs and the nationally available Training, Education, and Study Leave¹⁹ for medical officers do not exist for nurses.

As a result, nurses frequently rely on personal leave, such as annual leave, to fulfil their CPD obligations, creating additional financial and professional barriers. For those seeking to transition into specialised practice areas, further education is often required, but access to transition programs is inconsistent and dependent on individual health services.

“A nationally recognised framework that supports ongoing skills acquisition and competency building throughout nurses’ careers would also enhance career progression pathways”

Career progression pathways are unclear, and nurses have limited autonomy to transition into areas of personal interest or professional growth.

Further compounding this issue is the lack of standardised recognition for previously completed training when nurses move between organisations or jurisdictions. This inefficiency wastes resources, causes unnecessary retraining, and prevents nurses from practicing to their full scope of practice.

THE SOLUTION

ACN advocates for the adoption of a **National Nursing Capability Passport**, as recommended in the Scope of Practice Review.²⁰ This passport would ensure consistent and standardised recognition of nurses’ qualifications and training across jurisdictions, improving workforce mobility and reducing inefficiencies.²¹ Leveraging existing systems like the Aged Care Skills Passport and the Unique Student Identifier (USI) from vocational education would streamline implementation. By consolidating qualifications and training from both vocational and higher education, a National Nursing Capability Passport would allow nurses to work to their full scope of practice without redundant retraining.

Targeted scholarships are also essential to support equitable access to professional development opportunities for all nurses. Flexible scholarships should enable nurses to pursue education in specialised and subspecialised areas, ensuring that learning aligns with their career stage and personal goals. By funding CPD time and reducing financial barriers, the Government can improve workforce retention and foster a more skilled and adaptable nursing workforce.

A **nationally recognised framework** that supports ongoing skills acquisition and competency building throughout nurses’ careers would also enhance career progression pathways. Clearly defined pathways would empower nurses to plan and advance their careers effectively, fostering greater satisfaction and retention within the profession.

Building digital proficiency

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest \$3 million in program and scholarships funding** to advance digital literacy virtual technology education for nurses.
- **Expand nurse access to My Health Record** to improve system operability, ensure comprehensive health data, and enable seamless care coordination.
- **Broaden the availability of direct referrals through Medicare or other mechanisms**, allowing appropriately qualified nurses to facilitate timely care and referral to specialty services.

Investing in nurses' digital capability will enable them to harness modern technologies, reduce system fragmentation, and improve access to care, ensuring better health outcomes for all Australians.

THE ISSUE

Digital technologies are transforming health care, enabling improved access to services, and unlocking data-driven insights that improve patient outcomes.²² Studies demonstrate that health information technology positively impacts care quality and efficiency.²³

The *National Digital Health Strategy 2023–2028 Delivery Roadmap*²⁴ highlights the need for all stakeholders to ensure a digitally enabled workforce. Nurses, as the largest healthcare workforce group, are pivotal to implementing and using digital tools effectively. However, low digital literacy among healthcare staff impacts job satisfaction, organisational relationships, and the ability to deliver optimal care.²⁵ Not only do nurses need exceptional interpersonal skills, but they must now demonstrate these skills concurrently while using digital devices, maintaining the same high standards of patient interaction and care.

Artificial intelligence (AI), clinical decision support systems, predictive analytics, and virtual healthcare technologies like telehealth and remote patient monitoring have revolutionised care delivery.²⁶

“To meet the challenges of a digital healthcare landscape, Australia must prioritise developing a digitally literate nursing workforce”

Yet, improper design and implementation of these technologies—without nurse involvement—can harm patients.²⁷ Virtual health care, in particular, demands advanced digital literacy for managing telehealth platforms, ensuring data privacy, and communicating effectively in digital environments.

The segmented nature of Australia’s healthcare system further complicates care delivery. Limited digital operability means patients often navigate the system without a complete and unified health record. Nurses’ limited access to digital infrastructure, such as My Health Record, exacerbates this challenge, impacting the continuity and quality of care.

THE SOLUTION

To meet the challenges of a digital healthcare landscape, Australia must prioritise developing a digitally literate nursing workforce.²⁸ Providing nurses with access to systems such as My Health Record would significantly enhance healthcare operability. This would allow patients to move seamlessly through the health system with a complete and unified health record, improving care coordination and continuity.²⁹

Investing in targeting education programs and supporting nurses to access these through scholarships is essential to improve nurses’ digital and virtual literacy. These programs should focus on managing AI tools, virtual platforms, and understanding the ethical use of digital technologies. Incorporating these skills into the education of new nurses and offering targeted upskilling for the existing workforce are critical to ensuring the profession remains equipped for modern health care.

Modernising digital health systems must also address the specific needs of rural and remote health care.³⁰ Remote area nurses and other multidisciplinary team members must be actively involved in designing and implementing digital tools to ensure they are fit for purpose across Australia’s diverse geographic regions, as recommended in the National Digital Health Strategy.³¹

Enhancing nursing to facilitate ageing in place

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Allocate \$2 million** to develop specialised Home Aged Care Nursing Services education.
- **Invest \$52 million over three years** to fund 5,000 education scholarships in Home Care Aged Care Nursing services.

These measures will ensure that Australia's nursing workforce is empowered to provide comprehensive, person-centred care for older Australians, supporting the goals of the new Aged Care Act and strengthening the aged care sector.

THE ISSUE

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommended the development of a new Aged Care Act to establish a modern, rights-based framework for aged care in Australia.³² Central to this reform is the principle of “ageing in place,” allowing older Australians to remain in their own homes and avoid stressful transitions to new facilities.³³ This approach not only improves the quality of life for older individuals but also reduces the burden on hospital systems by minimising preventable admissions.

However, effectively implementing the new Aged Care Act³⁴ and supporting ageing in place requires a highly skilled nursing workforce. Nurses need additional education to manage the complex health conditions, chronic illnesses, and comorbidities in environments outside of the clinical space that many older Australians face. The demand for palliative and end-of-life care delivered at home is increasing, requiring a broader skill set that extends beyond traditional medical care.



THE SOLUTION

To expand nursing capability and meet the growing demands of home-based aged care, targeted education programs are essential. Nurses must be equipped with the skills to provide person- and family-centred care, addressing not only the physical needs of older Australians but also their emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing.

Specialised education programs in home care nursing should enable nurses to deliver care that aligns with the individual needs of older Australians in a setting of their choice. This includes enhancing their ability to manage complex conditions and provide palliative and end-of-life care that prioritises dignity and respect. Home care nursing education should also foster a holistic approach, recognising the profound impact of end-of-life experiences on individuals and their families.

Investing in such education programs will elevate the overall standard of care in the aged care sector, ensuring that nurses are well-prepared to deliver high-quality, compassionate care. This not only benefits older Australians and their families but also supports broader healthcare system reforms by reducing hospital admissions³⁵ and enabling better care in the community.

Supporting retirement transitions

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- Invest \$4 million to develop and implement a **National Transition to Retirement Guide** for nurses, providing organisations with strategies to retain experienced nurses through flexible retirement options.
- **Review age pension rulings** to increase the secondary income limit for high-need professions, such as nursing, enabling retiring nurses to remain in the workforce without financial disincentives.

By creating a clear career pathway that includes transition-to-retirement options, the Government can retain the expertise of older nurses, reduce workforce shortages, and ensure a sustainable, skilled healthcare system.

THE ISSUE

The nursing workforce includes a significant proportion of experienced professionals nearing retirement, with 80,562 nurses and midwives aged 50 to 59 and 54,458 aged 60 and over, totaling around 30% of the workforce.³⁶ These seasoned practitioners bring invaluable expertise, institutional knowledge, and mentorship potential to the healthcare industry. However, older nurses face unique challenges, including physical strain, fatigue from shift work, intergenerational differences, the rapid integration of digital healthcare technologies, and perceived inequities in workplace treatment including opportunities for advancement.³⁷

As a result, many nurses retire earlier than anticipated, creating critical gaps in the workforce, and exacerbating existing shortages. Retaining experienced nurses through transition-to-retirement programs is essential for sustaining a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. It allows older nurses to continue contributing meaningfully while fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and leadership development among younger nurses.



THE SOLUTION

ACN calls for the development and implementation of a National Transition to Retirement Guide tailored to the nursing profession. Such a guide would provide clear and practical strategies for employers to support flexible retirement pathways for nurses. Flexible work arrangements—such as roles split between clinical and non-clinical work, reduced shift work, mentoring, or clinical supervision positions—would enable nurses to adjust their workloads while remaining engaged in the profession.

A structured transition-to-retirement program would offer retiring nurses an opportunity to share their expertise with the next generation, bridging workforce and knowledge gaps while addressing industry shortages. Adapting a proven model, such as the NHS's *Improving Nurse Retention: Flexible Retirement Guide*³⁸, to the Australian context would provide organisations with a user-friendly resource to retain experienced nurses during their final working years. This ensures that transition to retirement is not seen as an exit, but as the culmination of a meaningful and fulfilling career pathway—one where nurses can leave a lasting legacy of knowledge, mentorship, and excellence in care.

Additionally, there is a need for the Government to review age pension rulings to increase the allowable limit of secondary income for high-need professions like nursing. This would incentivise nurses nearing retirement to remain in the workforce, either part-time or in flexible roles, without financial penalties, further addressing workforce shortages and preserving essential expertise.

Navigating perimenopause and menopause

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest \$5 million** in a national campaign to raise awareness about the impacts of perimenopause and menopause in the nursing workforce.
- **Allocate \$3 million** to develop and deliver an online perimenopause and menopause education program for nurses, incorporating a train-the-trainer approach.

These measures will ensure the nursing profession is equipped to address the challenges of menopause, enabling affected nurses to maintain their quality of life and extend their careers. With nurses being the most geographically dispersed health professionals, providing care across the lifespan and in diverse settings, these initiatives will strengthen their ability to deliver high-quality, person-centred care, benefiting women and communities more broadly.

THE ISSUE

Nursing is a predominantly female profession, with over 344,000 women (88%) making up the workforce.³⁹ Approximately half of these nurses are at an age where they may experience perimenopause or menopause symptoms, yet the impact of these life changes on nurses' quality of life, job performance, and career longevity remains largely unaddressed.

Around 80% of women experience symptoms associated with menopause, including vasomotor symptoms (hot flashes), insomnia, mood changes, and cognitive challenges.⁴⁰ These symptoms can significantly affect physical health, mental wellbeing, and the ability to perform in demanding roles like nursing. For many, the lack of workplace understanding and support exacerbates these challenges, creating barriers to productivity and contributing to workforce attrition.

The *National Women's Health Strategy 2020–2030*⁴¹ highlights the need for healthcare professionals to be trained in supporting women through perimenopause and menopause. Despite this, there are currently no national initiatives to educate or support nurses as they navigate these life stages.



THE SOLUTION

To address this gap, ACN recommends a national campaign to raise awareness about the impact of perimenopause and menopause on the nursing workforce. This campaign would focus on improving visibility, reducing stigma, and encouraging open dialogue about menopause-related symptoms in the workplace. It would also promote symptom management strategies, psychological support, and occupational health initiatives to create a supportive environment for affected nurses.

In parallel, ACN advocates for the development of a tailored education program for nurses. With nurses being the most geographically dispersed health professionals, providing care across the lifespan and in diverse settings, this program would strengthen their ability to deliver high-quality, person-centred care, benefiting women and communities more broadly. It would equip nurses with the knowledge and skills to identify, manage, and support women experiencing menopause, both among their colleagues and patients. A train-the-trainer model could amplify the program's impact by enabling nurses to share knowledge widely within their organisations.

By addressing the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive impacts of menopause on women, these initiatives will enhance quality of life, reduce workforce attrition, and promote career longevity. They will also empower nurses to lead discussions and provide care for others navigating menopause, fostering a culture of understanding and support within the profession.

Enabling the practice environment

Embedding clinical supervision

RECOMMENDATION

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest in the development and implementation a Nationally Consistent Clinical Supervision Framework** to provide all nurses with free and accessible clinical supervision.

By investing in clinical supervision, the Government can enhance the wellbeing of the nursing workforce, improve retention rates, and strengthen the delivery of safe, high-quality care across Australia. This essential support system is critical for sustaining a nursing workforce capable of meeting the challenges of a growing and complex healthcare system.

THE ISSUE

Nurses are the backbone of Australia's healthcare system, providing care across diverse settings and often supporting patients in vulnerable or complex situations. Despite their critical role, nurses frequently report high levels of stress, vicarious trauma, anxiety, and burnout. These pressures are significant contributors to the early exit of skilled nurses from the profession, exacerbating workforce shortages and placing additional strain on the healthcare system. This not only exacerbates the nursing shortage but also impacts patient outcomes, as nurses struggle to provide safe, high-quality care without proper support.⁴²

The *National Nursing Workforce Strategy*⁴³ identifies clinical supervision as a key strategy to combat burnout and improve job satisfaction among nurses. Clinical supervision offers a structured professional arrangement that fosters reflective practice, emotional support, and professional development. Evidence shows that nurses who participate in regular clinical supervision are more likely to feel valued and supported, increasing their job satisfaction and likelihood of staying in the profession.⁴⁴



In addition to workforce benefits, clinical supervision has been linked to improved patient outcomes.⁴⁵ While some jurisdictions and nursing specialties, such as in mental health and drug and alcohol, have adopted clinical supervision practices, the lack of a nationally consistent framework creates inequities and limits its potential impact.

Mentorship and clinical supervision are symbiotic components of a supportive practice environment. While clinical supervision provides structured reflective practice and emotional support, mentorship focuses on professional guidance, skill-building, and career development. Together, they form a comprehensive system to nurture all nurses, improve retention, and strengthen the nursing workforce.

THE SOLUTION

To safeguard the wellbeing of nurses and ensure a sustainable workforce, ACN calls for the establishment of a National Consistent Framework for clinical supervision. This framework would standardise access to clinical supervision across all jurisdictions and nursing specialties, ensuring equitable support for all nurses, regardless of where they work.

A national framework should include accredited education programs for clinical supervisors to ensure quality and consistency. It should also provide funding to integrate clinical supervision into practice, with the flexibility to accommodate the diverse needs of a 24/7 nursing workforce. By embedding clinical supervision as a core component of the nursing profession, the Government can reduce rates of burnout and foster a more resilient workforce while supporting better patient outcomes.

Empowering rural and remote opportunities

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest \$50 million** to establish **coordinator positions** within rural and remote health services to support nurses and student nurses' relocation and assimilation.
- **Assist universities and nursing education providers** in adapting metropolitan nursing curriculums for delivery in rural and remote contexts, ensuring consistency in education and fostering locally appropriate solutions.

These measures would create a supportive practice environment, enhance the quality of nursing education in rural areas, and build a pipeline of locally trained nurses committed to serving rural and remote communities. This initiative would secure the future of healthcare services in these regions while positioning rural nursing as an attractive and viable career pathway.

THE ISSUE

Approximately seven million Australians—28% of the population—live in rural and remote areas, where accessing health care services remains a persistent challenge.⁴⁶ These communities face higher rates of physical and mental health conditions, exacerbated by limited access to healthcare and higher engagement in risky behaviours.⁴⁷

Nurses are the cornerstone of the rural and remote healthcare workforce, often serving as the first and sometimes the only point of contact for patients. However, despite workforce attraction incentives encouraging nurses to relocate to these areas, many nurses experience isolation and disconnection once they arrive.⁴⁸ The rural healthcare experience is inherently tied to a sense of community and belonging, which is often lacking for newly arrived nurses. Without adequate social and emotional support, these nurses are less likely to stay in their roles, compromising the sustainability of healthcare services in these regions.

Additionally, rural and remote areas face significant challenges in both nursing education and retention. Nursing students and professionals in these regions often lack access to the resources, facilities, and curriculum consistency available to their metropolitan counterparts. This disparity not only limits opportunities for nurses already working in rural and remote areas to upskill and gain further post-graduate qualifications but also forces local residents interested in becoming nurses to move away to complete their undergraduate education. These challenges contribute to a shortage of locally trained nurses, further exacerbating healthcare access issues in these communities.

THE SOLUTION

ACN recommends a dual approach to create a more supportive and sustainable practice environment in rural and remote areas.

First, the Government should invest in dedicated coordinator positions within rural and remote health services. These coordinators, ideally experienced nurses transitioning into retirement, would provide essential clinical supervision, mentoring, and social support to new nurses and student nurses in these regions. They would help nurses navigate the practical and social aspects of rural life, including housing, accessing local resources, and integrating into the community through organised activities. This support would foster a sense of belonging and connection, addressing the isolation often reported by rural nurses and improving retention rates.

Second, the Government should collaborate with universities and nursing education providers to deliver undergraduate nursing programs directly in rural and remote locations. By adapting metropolitan-based programs for local delivery, consistency in education can be maintained while addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of rural health care. Universities and training providers could implement innovative models, such as blended learning, locally tailored clinical placements, or satellite campuses, to ensure aspiring and current nurses in these areas have access to high-quality education without needing to relocate. This approach would equip nurses with the skills needed to thrive in rural settings while fostering a sustainable, skilled, and trusted local workforce, while reducing reliance on attracting nurses from urban centres.

Cultivating nurse leadership

Building mentorship programs

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest in developing a Mentoring Capability Framework** tailored to the nursing profession to standardise mentorship practices and improve the transition experience for new graduate nurses.
- **Fund the development of a Nurse Mentor Preparation Course** to equip experienced nurses with the skills to effectively mentor early-career professionals.

A strong mentorship framework will enhance career pathways, support the transition into the workforce, and foster a culture of professional growth and retention, ultimately strengthening Australia's nursing workforce and improving patient outcomes.

THE ISSUE

Despite a 7.4% increase in undergraduate nursing completions in 2021, the nursing workforce is in decline, with 8,315 nurses and midwives leaving the profession between 2021 and 2023.⁴⁹ This alarming attrition rate highlights a critical gap in support systems, particularly for early-career nurses. Without adequate guidance and mentorship, these early-career professionals face increased risks of burnout, job dissatisfaction, and early exit from the workforce.^{50,51}

“Mentorship and clinical supervision... form a comprehensive system to nurture all nurses, improve retention, and strengthen the nursing workforce”

Mentorship has proven effective in addressing these challenges in other professions. For example, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) offers a structured 12-month mentorship program, and the Victorian Government has developed a *Mentoring Capability Framework*⁵² for educators. These initiatives demonstrate how mentorship can foster career readiness, improve retention, and enhance professional growth. However, the nursing profession lacks a national framework or consistent approach to mentorship, leaving many new nurses without the support they need to succeed.

Mentorship and clinical supervision are symbiotic components of a supportive practice environment. While clinical supervision provides structured reflective practice and emotional support, mentorship focuses on professional guidance, skill-building, and career development. Together, they form a comprehensive system to nurture all nurses, improve retention, and strengthen the nursing workforce.

THE SOLUTION

ACN recommends that the Australian Government collaborate with the nursing profession to develop a tailored National Mentoring Capability Framework. This framework would standardise mentorship practices nationally, create clear career pathways, and ensure that all nurses receive the guidance they need to transition successfully into clinical practice.

To complement the framework, ACN advocates for the introduction of a nurse mentor preparation course. This course would equip experienced nurses with the skills and knowledge required to mentor effectively, fostering confidence and competence in mentees. By educating both mentors and mentees, the program would ensure the success of these partnerships, building a robust support system for new nurses.

Establishing mentorship as a cornerstone of the nursing career pathway would not only support early-career nurses but also provide experienced nurses with meaningful opportunities to share their knowledge and leadership, contributing to their own career satisfaction and longevity.

Advancing nurse leaders

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls on the Australian Government to:

- **Invest \$500,000 to support and enhance leadership skills for nurses** through the completion of dedicated nurse leadership courses through ACN's Institute of Leadership.
- Partner with ACN's Institute of Leadership to develop and implement a **specialised leadership program tailored to the needs of Aged Care Nurse Leaders.**

By strengthening nurse leadership, the Government can ensure a healthcare system led by strategic and innovative leaders equipped to address modern challenges. Specifically, leadership programs for Aged Care Nurse Leaders will enhance team performance, improve care quality and safety, and foster person-centred approaches, directly benefiting vulnerable older Australians. This investment will empower nurse leaders to drive positive change and deliver exceptional aged care services.

THE ISSUE

Nurse leaders are essential to designing and delivering safe, cost-effective, and innovative healthcare systems. These leaders include nurse unit managers (NUMs), nurse executives, residential care managers, directors of nursing, chief nursing officers and nurses serving on Boards. They play pivotal roles across diverse healthcare settings, navigating the complex social, political, and economic challenges facing Australia's healthcare system.

Despite the critical importance of these roles, many nurse leaders are underprepared for the complexities of modern healthcare leadership. Only 33% of NUMs have education beyond an undergraduate level, highlighting a gap in formalised advanced leadership development. With the demand for NUMs expected to grow by 23.1% by 2026⁵⁴, equipping nurse leaders with the skills to address these challenges is more urgent than ever. Strengthening leadership capabilities at all levels of the nursing profession is vital to building a resilient and effective healthcare system.



THE SOLUTION

Enhancing leadership skills through targeted education programs is essential for empowering nurse leaders to thrive in their roles and drive positive change in health care. Leadership education tailored to the unique challenges of nursing prepare nurses to excel in key areas such as governance, strategic planning, workforce management, and patient care innovation.

The ACN's Institute of Leadership offers education for nurses at all career stages, helping them transition into senior positions with confidence. By equipping emerging and current nurse leaders with advanced skills, these programs improve the quality of care, strengthen governance structures, and foster a positive workplace culture.

Investing in nurse leadership education supports not only individual career development but also the broader nursing workforce by creating clear pathways to senior roles. Enhanced leadership skills ensure that nurse leaders can effectively guide their teams, and can successfully lead the service, others, and themselves.⁵⁵



About the Australian College of Nursing

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is the national voice of the nursing profession focused on policy, advocacy, and education to advance nurses' status, recognition, and respect.

We are the only organisation representing nurses across the care continuum and all specialties, ensuring the diverse needs of the profession are advocated for at every level.

We are committed to our intent of 'Shaping Health, Advancing Nursing' to enhance the health care of all Australians.

Our membership, events and higher education services allow nurses at all levels to stay informed, connected and inspired.

ACN's Institute of Leadership is the peak provider of nurse leadership education in Australia, dedicated to empowering nurses with the skills and knowledge to lead with confidence and drive meaningful change within the healthcare sector.

We are excited to lead change and create a strong, collective voice for our profession by bringing together thousands of extraordinary nurses nationwide.

ACN is an Australian member of the International Council of Nurses headquartered in Geneva, in collaboration with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF).



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