

Administration of Health Practitioner registration
by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA)
Senate Enquiry, April 2011

Dear enquiry members,

I am a Registered Nurse in NSW. I was originally registered in NSW in October 1982 and have worked full time maintaining NSW Registration Board registration until the end of 2010. I attempted to renew my registration under the AHPRA agency on line. I remember at the time finding the process somewhat difficult, but I believed that I had completed the process. I acknowledge that initially this process is one of self responsibility and I didn't follow up the process and check that due process had occurred. I was aware that you did not receive the "old" NSW card that we previously received. Also it was unfortunate that my annual performance management appraisal was delayed and so the "normal" check of registration did not occur in a timely manner.

I left the country for holidays on the 3rd January 2011. I checked the mail that morning and had not received any mail from AHPRA. I returned from holidays and collected my mail on the 19th January 2011. There was in fact mail from AHPRA which I did not initially open as the AHPRA logo is similar to a vitamin company that I have dealt with in the past and believed that this was "junk mail". I opened the mail on the evening of January 24th. The correspondence from AHPRA dated December 20th 2010 was notification to me that owing to the fact that I had not renewed my registration by the due date of October 31st and that the "month's grace" had expired, I was now deregistered. I contacted my employers immediately as I was still on Annual Leave and was due back to work on January 27th.

I contacted AHPRA first thing Tuesday 25th January morning. At this phone call and every subsequent phone call the wait time was always lengthy, with time ranging from four minutes through to thirty minutes before you spoke to someone. When I initially contacted AHPRA on Tuesday 25th January, I was advised by the officer that I needed to send in my registration renewal form. I was also advised that to expedite the process I should send my form in by Express Post. At this first phone call I asked twice if I could come in person to the AHPRA office and was told definitively that there was no "shop front" available and the best I could do was to Express Post my renewal form. I duly did this retaining my receipt number. I rang the AHPRA phone number on Tuesday 1st February enquiring to the progress of my renewal. I was informed that there was not any form of tracking system and that I should ring back on Tuesday 8th January.

I rang on a daily basis and was given the same reply that I needed to check my email and post and that was all they could do but the process could be prolonged due to the high numbers of forms they were having to process. By this stage I was becoming increasingly frustrated and distressed with the system. On Wednesday 9th February I was fortunate to speak with an extremely helpful officer named . He initially was able to tell me that the AHPRA office had no record of receiving my mail and suggested that I needed to

contact Australia Post. I was extremely upset at this “non development” as I was now up to eleven working days enforced leave and was now informed that the Agency had in fact not received my mail.

I contacted Australia Post who within three minutes was able to tell me that they had delivered my mail to the AHPRA mail box at the Sydney GPO. I contacted with this information; he again rechecked and reluctantly said that it appeared that my mail had been lost. I was notably upset and he was advising me what he thought I needed to do and in this conversation he repeated several times I needed to resend or present my documents into AHPRA. I realized that he was talking about “documents” in a plural context. I stated that I had only sent one form in this was the renewal form that I had been directed to submit.

He then realized that I had been incorrectly informed of what process I had to follow given I was deregistered. I in fact had to apply for Nurse Registration as if I was a new graduate and or a newly arrived migrant. This process in itself takes some time and I was able to complete the documents required and deliver them personally to the supposed non existent AHPRA office in Sydney on Friday 11th April 2011. This is now thirteen working days since I commenced this process.

I presented my documents to the reception staff that receipted them and dutifully informed me that the process from that day could take up to ninety days! due to the current workload and the time it takes to gain a Criminal Record Check. I stated that I was currently employed within NSW Health and surely a letter from current and even past employers could expedite this. I was clearly informed that the “system” considered me unknown and that I was required to participate in the same rigorous process that all other new graduates had to undergo. I proceeded to ring AHPRA every second day from Monday 14th February through till Tuesday February 22nd to attempt to gain some time line of when I could return to work and was continually told to check my mail as I would be informed once my registration was completed.

By Wednesday 23rd February I was extremely distressed about this ongoing fiasco. I contacted AHPRA and asked was there a process to make an official complaint and I was given a postal address, there was no capacity to email correspondence into AHPRA. At this time a colleague who was going through a similar process with deregistration was being given conflicting advice eg that she could return to work prior to the attainment of her Criminal Record Check if her current employer was prepared to send in written confirmation that she had not been convicted of any crime during her current employment. This same colleague had been given the name of _____ a senior manager in AHPRA. I contacted his office and received a voice message informing that he was in Tasmania; he included his mobile phone number in this message. I decided to text his mobile with a very brief message asking him to contact me at his convenience. _____ was very prompt in replying to my text with a phone call and assured me he would direct a Senior Manger responsible for NSW to contact me.

In parallel with this process I had also emailed in desperation the Director General of Health in NSW (at that time) Professor Deborah Piccone. When the NSW manager contacted me I informed her that I had also contacted the Director General’s office. This appeared to irritate the NSW manager. I attempted to inform her of the desperate situation I was in but did not receive any level of empathy or reassurance. After speaking with the director General’s Executive Assistant, she assured me that the NSW Chief Nurse and Midwifery office would contact me. Later that afternoon I was contacted from this office and they assured me that my case had been expedited and that I should hear something very soon.

Friday 25th February mid morning I checked my email and found there was an email from

AHPRA stating that I had gained registration and I was allowed to return to work.

This frustrating, distressing and punitive process caused me to be forcibly absent from work for twenty four working days, basically four weeks. I find it very difficult to reconcile that in this current climate of health provision crisis that as an experienced Registered Nurse, I was unable to work for that period of time due to an ineffective, inflexible, monolithic system. Fortunately the process was finally resolved due to me contacting the Director General of Health. I would believe that this position has got far more important activities, tasks and issues than being involved in registration issues. I am eternally grateful for the intervention. I need to state that I am a proponent of the national system and believe that the changes will be a quality improvement for health provision in this country but it must be appropriately resourced. It must recognize that the workforce they are dealing with are "human" and will make mistakes in their annual registration renewal process, especially in the first year of a new national system.

I acknowledge my part in this protracted saga back in October 2010 when I did not process my renewal correctly. The delay in informing me of my eventual deregistration is difficult to understand but the lengthy protracted process to regain registration is inconceivable.

The system desperately requires reviewing to ensure that when a currently employed health practitioner is deregistered because of administrative issues eg failure to renew registration by due date, that whilst in fairness there may be a financial penalty applied, the punitive and wasteful process of preventing a current employed worker to be at work does not achieve anything.

This whole process caused me great distress and stress. I experienced several weeks of sleeplessness, hypertension and an overwhelming sense of helplessness which I have never experienced in my whole career

I am a fifty year old mother of four. I have worked full time since 1982 except for maternity leave. I have worked in Palliative Care for the past twenty five years and am currently a CNC 3, Nurse Coordinator of a large Palliative Care Service. This process has caused me great professional embarrassment, delayed several major projects that I am responsible for and contributed to some financial hardship as I had to take leave without pay for part of my enforced absence from work. My family was also affected by this whole process and I sincerely hope it does not happen to anyone else.

I am hopeful that the agency will be suitably resourced following this review and would also hope that there maybe an opportunity for re crediting of the annual leave that I was forced to take and reparation of the period of leave without pay that I was forced to take

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this Senate enquiry.

Regards
Therese Smeal