

3 May 2021

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) thanks the Senate Community Affairs References Committee for the opportunity to provide comment on the *Administration of registration and notifications by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and related entities under the Health Practitioner National Law*.

The RACGP is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing more than 41,000 members working in or towards a career in general practice in urban and rural areas.

The administration of registration and notifications by Ahpra and related entities can have significant consequences for our members. As we have raised in previous Senate inquiries and submissions to Ahpra, the current notifications system can be extremely stressful for practitioners. It can have severe impacts on practitioner reputation and mental health, even in circumstances where the practitioner is found to be not at fault.

Actions as a result of previous inquiries

The RACGP [previously identified](#) a series of issues regarding the Ahpra notifications process as part of the 2017 Senate inquiry into the *Complaints mechanism administered under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law*. We received an overwhelming response from our members who have experienced, or knew of practitioners who had experienced, issues relating to Ahpra's notifications and complaints mechanism.

A key concern was the apparent inability of the complaints mechanism to sufficiently vet vexatious complaints.

The Senate Committee agreed with the RACGP and recommended that Ahpra develop and publish a framework for identifying and dealing with vexatious complaints. Recently, Ahpra has released its vexatious complaints [framework](#), a move that is welcomed by the profession. We are pleased to see Ahpra move towards recognising issues within the system and an increase in its appetite to appropriately address them.

The RACGP hopes that issues raised during this latest Senate inquiry will result in similar improvements.

Outstanding issues with complaints mechanism

Further improvements can be made to the notifications process, particularly in terms of communication, transparency, timeliness and recognition of the impacts of the assessment and investigation process on a practitioner's mental health.

It must be recognised that the sheer volume of complaints being investigated by Ahpra and the National Boards is likely impacting their ability to provide a high-quality service ensuring all parties feel heard and supported.

The [Ahpra 2019/20 annual report](#) notes that the National Boards closed 70.2% of notifications following an assessment (up from 68.1% in 2018/19) and these notifications did not require further investigation. In 92.4% of cases closed following an assessment, the National Boards decided to take no further action.

It is clear that a large percentage of the notifications, Ahpra receives, result in no further action. However, even in these circumstances, there is significant time commitment required from both Ahpra and the practitioner, and there is still the potential for the practitioner to experience reputational and stress induced consequences because of the notification.

It is essential that there is an avenue available for notifications to be made regarding healthcare and health services. However, the RACGP believes that there is need for a review and overhaul of the complaints process, especially in the early stage. A suitable process for complaints can ensure that complaints are directed to the most appropriate body for vetting and assessment, freeing up resources for Ahpra to appropriately manage other notifications.

While the framework introduced to identify vexatious complaints will help in reducing the burden of complaints on Ahpra and the National Boards, it will not fully address this issue. As identified by the [2017 Ahpra commissioned research Reducing, identifying and managing vexatious complaints](#), vexatious complaints account for less than 1% of notifications received. The vetting process, while important, will have limited impact on freeing up Ahpra resources to focus on supporting practitioners and notifiers through the notification process overall.

Recommendation: Using findings from this inquiry and the 2017 inquiry into the Complaints mechanism administered under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law, the Senate Committee should recommend an overhaul of the notifications process with the intention of easing pressure on Ahpra and the National Boards. This will ensure more resources can be dedicated to managing remaining notifications and supporting practitioners and notifiers through the notification process.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our submission. The RACGP wishes to stay involved with this important Senate inquiry and welcomes the opportunity to provide comment from a general practice perspective on any issues that are presented to the Senate Committee as part of this inquiry.

Should you wish to seek further comment from the RACGP, please contact myself or Ms Leonie Scott, National Manager – Policy and Advocacy

Yours sincerely

Dr Karen Price
President