

## OVERVIEW

Nursing is a great profession, established over 150 years ago and now providing the largest group of employees in the health care sector.

Yet nursing in Australia is still significantly overlooked in health policy development and in workforce calculations. The shortages of nursing staff, especially in hospitals and aged care that has been threatening for years, have now reached crisis point.

The Committee received evidence of critical shortages of nurses in all areas of health care services. In some areas, particularly aged care and mental health nursing, the problems due to nurse shortages are acute.

Issues associated with nursing including nurse recruitment and retention, workforce planning, education and specialised fields of nursing practice have been the subject of many inquiries, reviews, research projects and commissioned studies in recent years. While the Commonwealth, States and Territories have been implementing recommendations and strategies from these various reviews, concerns were expressed to the Committee that structural changes and reforms to overcome the major issues were slow in occurring.

Nursing has traditionally been a patient profession. Nurses are extremely dedicated and passionate about the health care they provide and the work they perform. However, nurses' frustration at perceived inaction has led to a growing militancy among their ranks. The Committee considers that there have been enough reviews. It is now time for leadership and action.

Nursing as a profession involves many stakeholders and contains many complexities and inter-relationships.

The Committee has made many recommendations, acknowledging that a range of jurisdictions have roles and responsibilities in relation to nursing including the Commonwealth, States and Territories, the Australian Nursing Council and State registration boards, professional nursing bodies including the Nursing Colleges, the Unions, the Universities and TAFEs, and the providers of health and aged care services that employ nurses in the public and private sectors.

The Committee considers that the need for a national nursing workforce planning strategy is fundamental and urgent. There is a requirement for a strong national leadership and coordination role, which should be undertaken by the Commonwealth due to the crucial role that it plays in the funding and delivery of health, education and aged care services.

To assist with national nursing policy, workforce planning and coordination, and to advise the Commonwealth government on nursing issues, the Committee has recommended the establishment of a Commonwealth Chief Nurse position in the

Department of Health and Ageing. The position would be equivalent to the Principal Nursing Adviser/Chief Nurse positions in the States and Territories.

The Committee supports the continuation of the current university-based system for the undergraduate education of registered nurses.

Evidence to the Committee highlighted that increasing the numbers of nursing graduates is a critical part of addressing the shortage problem. The Committee has addressed a range of issues in relation to undergraduate and postgraduate education and made many recommendations the area of nurse education including:

- the need for additional funded undergraduate places in nursing courses,
- enhanced clinical training and assistance with clinical placements as part of undergraduate courses, and
- additional scholarships to assist in attracting students into nursing as well as undertaking postgraduate study.

The Committee believes that like other university disciplines nursing research needs to be encouraged to continue and further develop and has made recommendations for increased research funding.

The Committee has also made a number of recommendations to improve the interface between the education sector and health system including partnership initiatives and arrangements, joint curriculum development and joint appointments, and sharing of facilities.

One area of significant loss of nurses is in the first year after graduation. The Committee has recommended that greater coordination and financial support be provided in programs for the transition of new graduates into the healthcare system. The Committee considers that there needs to be a formalisation of the graduate nurse programs and of the training and payment of nurses chosen to be preceptors.

Inadequate pay and unsympathetic and inflexible working conditions are major contributing factors to nurses leaving the profession. Improving the recruitment and retention of nurses is largely about addressing these issues.

The Committee has made recommendations which are applicable to all categories of nurses to address issues of recruitment and retention including:

- promotion of a positive image for nursing and the highly skilled work of nurses;
- extending professional development and continued education opportunities;
- development of improved career pathways and opportunity with professional recognition and remuneration of knowledge, skills and education;
- increasing remuneration;
- improving working conditions, especially workload, double shifts and flexibility in rostering and working hours;
- expanding refresher and return to nursing programs;

- 
- the introduction of more family friendly practices to meet nurse expectations;
  - providing more effective nursing leadership and management, including greater nurse involvement in decision making; and
  - provision of a safe working environment that ensures nurses are free of fear, intimidation and violence.

Aged care nursing was singled-out as the sector of nursing in greatest crisis. Qualified nurses are leaving in large numbers and not being replaced. Salary rates for aged care nurses are significantly lower than for equivalent nurses in all other areas of nursing.

The Committee considers that there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that all those in the aged care sector receive the quality of care that the Australian community expects. The Committee believes that aged care nurses should have access to working conditions, and receive remuneration and recognition, commensurate with their training and professionalism and comparable to similarly qualified nurses in other health areas.

The Committee has made a number of recommendations in aged care including reducing the burden of paperwork required under RCS funding, the need for pay parity, the increasing use of unqualified workers in aged care, introducing measures to reduce occupational injuries to nurses working in aged care, and to improve educational opportunity in aged care at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Mental health nursing shortages made it another area requiring urgent action, to ensure that those already working in mental health are supported and provided with opportunities for further education, and improved career pathways; to ensure that there is an adequate take-up of postgraduate places in mental health nursing courses; and that postgraduate education for mental health nurses is rationalised and reformed.

Attracting and retaining nurses in rural and remote areas is increasingly difficult. Experienced nurses find moving to non-metropolitan areas unattractive due to the expense of moving, inadequate accommodation, lack of remuneration commensurate to qualifications and the degree of isolation or remoteness. Nursing staff already employed in rural and remote areas are leaving because of workload, lack of recognition of their skills, poor educational opportunities and pressures of providing care that may be outside their scope of practice.

The Committee strongly believes that it is important to encourage more Indigenous nurses into the general nursing workforce. Increasing the number of Indigenous people in the nursing workforce will improve the accessibility, quality and cultural appropriateness of health care for Indigenous communities. Increased participation in nursing will also extend an improved cultural awareness among non-indigenous members of the health workforce.

Specialised areas of nursing practice are also confronted with a range of recruitment and retention problems. The health care system needs experienced specialist nurses. With health care becoming more complex, nurses are seeking to undertake additional education to increase their knowledge and skills.

Nurses endeavouring to further their education in specialised areas face difficulties due to the cost of post graduate education, lack of suitable courses, lack of support from employers and lack of recognition and remuneration of their enhanced skills. This is contributing to nurse shortages in many areas including midwifery, paediatrics, community care, critical care and emergency nursing, as well as aged care and mental health.

The Committee recognises that these areas of health care could not now function without specialist nursing support. With the ageing nurse workforce and insufficient numbers of new graduates moving into specialist areas, there is little prospect of the situation improving without immediate action being taken.

The nursing profession has undergone a massive transformation in the previous 10-15 years. Nurses have won the struggle to move nursing education into the higher education sector, they have had to adjust to new medical health technologies, developments in information technology, and dramatic shifts in the approach to patient care in hospitals and the community.

Nurses have had to cope with the effects on patient care of increasing demands being placed on health services through constantly contracting budgets. Yet nurses have little opportunity to participate in the formulation of policies to deal with or address these changes.

It is time for the nursing profession to be recognised as an equal player in Australia's health care system.

It is time for the voice of nurses to be heard.

The patient profession is running out of patience!

It is time for action.

