



The National Aged Care Phone-In

On Saturday 3 July 2004, the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) Federal Office and State Branches conducted a national aged care phone-in. The purpose of the phone-in was to raise awareness about aged care issues in the lead up to the forthcoming federal election, and to provide an opportunity for people working in aged care, residents, and families and friends of residents, to share their views about the current delivery of aged care services in Australia.

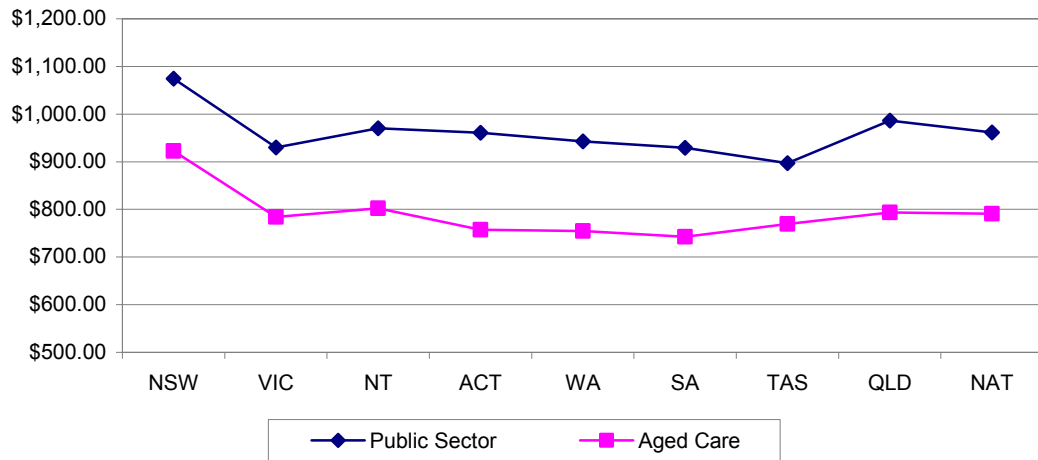
Concerns about the current delivery of aged care services have been consistently raised with the ANF. Inadequate staffing levels; inappropriate skills mix; excessive workloads; declining standards of care; and excessive documentation, have been frequently reported, and have contributed to difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified nursing staff to work in the sector.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare¹ report that between 1996 and 2001, there was an 11.1% decline in the number of registered and enrolled nurses working in the aged care sector. This is of considerable concern at a time when bed numbers are increasing, as is the number of residents requiring a high level of care.

A national shortage of nurses and the wages gap between nurses working in the aged care sector and nurses working in the public hospital sector, which currently stands at 21.6% or \$170.50 per week national average, is exacerbating the recruitment and retention difficulties.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2003 *Nursing Labour Force 2002*

Registered Nurse Wage Comparisons March 2004

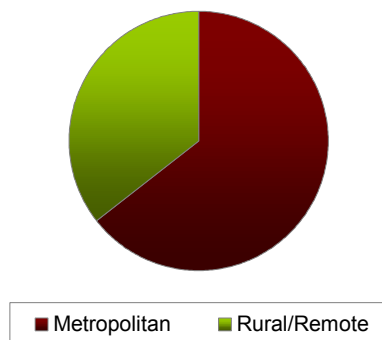


Based on RN Level 1 Year 8. Victorian rates are based on RN Grade 2 Year 8 (comparable to RN Level 1 Year 8 in other States and Territories)

It was in this environment that the aged care phone-in was conducted. Over 1,000 people called the State Branches of the ANF to speak to Branch Officials. The issues raised were carefully documented, collated and analysed.

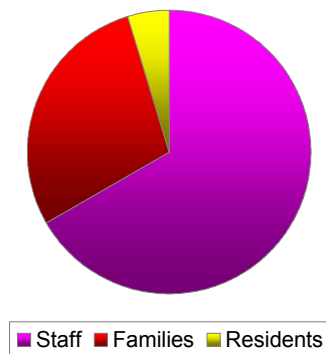
Sixty four per cent of callers were from metropolitan areas, with 35.6% from rural or remote areas.

Figure 1
Place of Residence of Callers



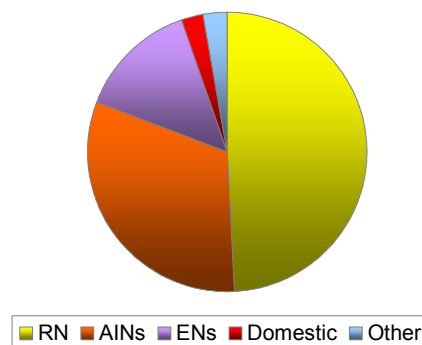
Staff comprised 61.9% of callers; 26.5% were relatives, friends, or concerned members of the community, and 4.5% were residents in aged care facilities.

Figure 2:
Type of Caller



Staff who called consisted of: 49.2% registered nurses; 31.7% assistants in nursing (or personal care assistants); 13.7% enrolled nurses; 2.6% domestic services staff; and 2.8% other staff. The majority of staff (93.3%) worked in the residential aged care sector, with 3.4% working in public hospitals and 3.3% in the community.

Figure 3
Staff Categories

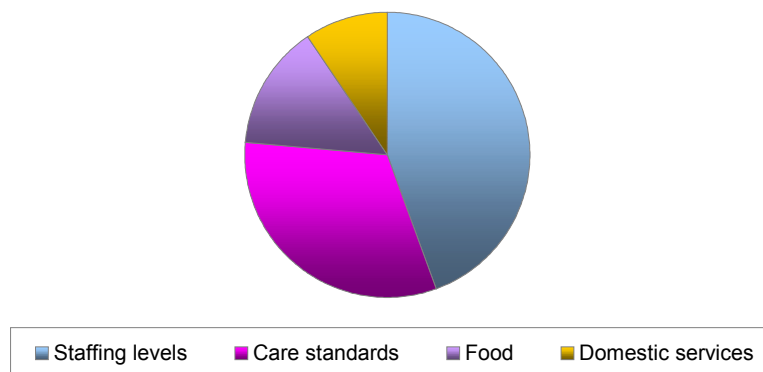


The four top issues of concern by staff, residents and families were: inadequate staffing levels (86.1%); inadequate standards of care (62.0%); complaints about food (27.1%); and inadequate domestic services (18.4%).

- *Staffing levels are appalling. Staff go through hell with unreasonable workloads, unreasonable stress levels and unreasonable expectations. Surely this is not what the Government want (resident Tasmania).*
- *Staffing levels have deteriorated over the past four years. It is very distressing (relative of resident Tasmania).*
- *Staffing levels are too low. We only have time to perform essential tasks. We have no time to spend with the residents (PCA SA).*

- *Staff are doing a marvelous job but there aren't enough of them and they just can't keep it up (relative of resident NSW).*
- *I worked in a dementia unit. We were forever losing nursing hours. We just couldn't provide adequate care. The last time hours were cut I told management 'this is unjust to both residents and staff. I'm out of here' (RN Queensland).*
- *Food and domestic services, particularly cleaning, have deteriorated. My mother's food is routinely delivered cold (relative of resident Queensland).*

Figure 4
Issues of Concern

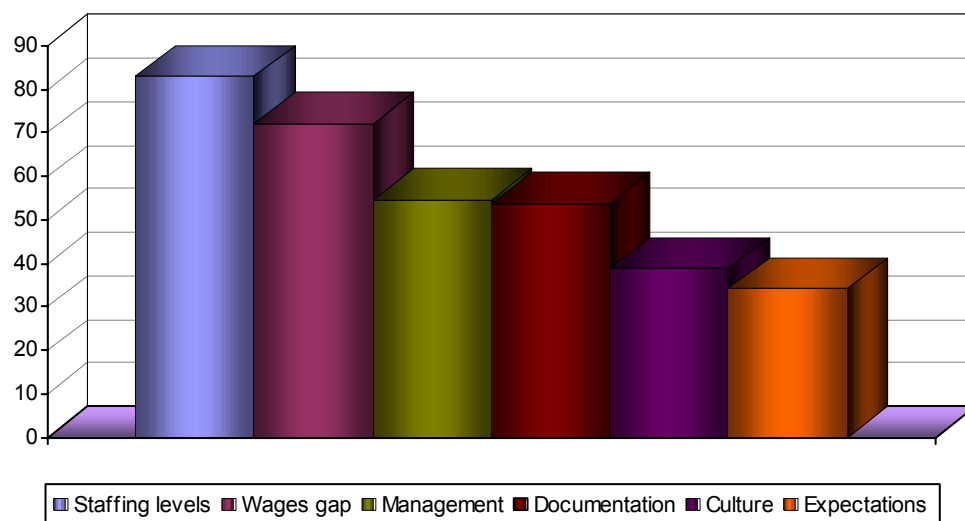


Callers were also asked if they considered staffing levels to be adequate - 85.9% of callers said no, with 70.9% considering that there were inadequate numbers of registered nurses. Callers were also asked if they considered government funding for aged care to be adequate - 86.7% of callers said no, however most callers qualified their response by saying they knew the Government had increased funding for aged care, however they did not know how the money was being spent and it had not resulted in any improvements in staffing levels or care.

- *Money is not spent on residents or staff. The owners need to be made answerable for how they spend the money (community member Queensland).*
- *I think the funding is OK but it must be directed to 'frontline care'. That's just not happening now (relative of resident NSW).*
- *I worked out that I can only spend 27 minutes with each resident during an 8 hour shift. This is appalling. How can I treat people with dignity and maintain nursing standards? (RN SA).*
- *We survive because we have short breaks, go flat strap and work beyond our finishing times. We work under pressure all the time (RN Queensland).*
- *Staff have no time to interact with or support residents, but they show extraordinary care and compassion (relative of resident Tasmania).*

When asked why they thought nurses did not want to work or ceased working in aged care, 83.1% of callers nominated inadequate staffing levels; 72.1% the wages gap between nurses working in aged care and nurses working in other sectors; 54.6% inappropriate management practices, including lack of support for staff; 53.8% nominated excessive documentation; 38.9% the culture of the workplace; and 19.4% unrealistic expectations from residents and relatives and friends of residents.

Figure 5
Why Nurses Leave Aged Care



- *I no longer work in aged care. We were so short staffed that I couldn't provide safe care and my own safety was being compromised as well (RN Tasmania).*
- *We have horrendous workloads and heavy workloads particularly for the AINs. It is all task focused. We do not get any time to provide quality of care let alone quality of life (RN Queensland).*
- *I just can't cope with the workloads any more (EN Tasmania).*
- *Management need to spend time on the floor to see what is happening. It's all about money. They won't acknowledge that there is not enough time to get the work done (relative of resident Tasmania).*
- *I could work in a supermarket for more money and less stress (PCA Victoria).*
- *The poor wages in aged care are a disgrace. Management does not value older people. They are just there to make money (resident NSW).*
- *There is a huge amount of documentation, most of it repetitive. I do at least an hour of unpaid paperwork after every shift (RN Queensland).*

When asked what could be done to address the issues raised, 83.0% said more staff were required, while 77.6% of callers said more funding was required.

- *Money must be spent on staff and residents, not buildings or profits (Domestic services worker Victoria).*
- *Let's get real. The people we are caring for are someone's parents or grandparents. They deserve to be looked after properly (EN SA).*
- *It is very disheartening when I visit my mother. The facility needs more staff and more qualified staff not just extra staff (relative of resident Tasmania).*
- *The accreditation process is a farce. Everything is set up for the day and then disappears (Cook in aged care Victoria).*
- *Management don't value staff. When I think about it, they don't value residents either, otherwise they would employ more staff (relative of resident NSW).*
- *We need more staff. The burden of caring is falling on increasingly fewer people (RN Queensland).*

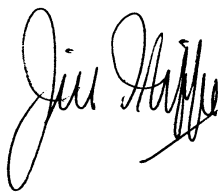
Other issues frequently raised by callers included: the increasing and inappropriate use of unqualified workers as substitutes for qualified nurses; the lack of accountability and transparency in the way funding to the aged care sector was being used; the lack of time staff had to spend with people to add the quality to their care; the lack of continuity of care due to increasing staff turnover; and the increasing reliance on family members and friends to provide basic care such as toileting and feeding.

- *When my mother goes to visit my father she goes to feed him. If she didn't he just wouldn't be fed. It's not the fault of the staff. There is just not enough staff to cope with all that needs to be done (relative of resident SA).*
- *My mother has dementia. I was told I had to help look after her because there wasn't enough staff. I am in my 70's and I'm finding it difficult. It's not the staff's fault. There just isn't enough of them to do the work. I feel the Government is neglecting my mother (relative of resident Tasmania).*
- *There needs to be more transparency and accountability in the management of funding. Where is it all going to? (relative of resident Tasmania).*
- *I am constantly doing duties beyond my skill level (AIN Queensland).*
- *I frequently worked double shifts and got called in to work on my days off. Sick leave was not replaced. I worked long hours and was always rushed. I became an expert in cutting corners which got too scary so I left (EN Victoria).*

The results of the phone-in confirmed the views held by the ANF. The messages for the current Federal Government, which has responsibility for the aged care sector, and for the political parties in the lead up to the forthcoming federal election are very clear.

- *What is the point of the Government pouring money into aged care if it doesn't make things any better for residents or staff (EN SA).*
- *Governments need to value older people. How can they let older people suffer. It's inhuman (relative of resident Victoria).*
- *Politicians are getting older every day. They should think about what it will be like to be a resident in an aged care facility– then things might change (relative of resident Queensland).*
- *I just can't do it anymore. I love working in aged care but it is too demoralising, not being able to provide quality care to people who have every right to be cared for with dignity and respect (RN Tasmania).*
- *I'm not getting any younger myself, but if I need care, you would have to drag me kicking and screaming into an aged care facility (RN Victoria).*

The ANF wants to see the development of guidelines that provide minimum staffing levels and skills mix and the clear requirement for 24 hour registered nurse cover for all high care residents in aged care facilities. The ANF is also calling for additional dedicated funding to the aged care sector to close the wages gap between staff working in aged care and their public hospital colleagues and to keep it closed, and the introduction of annual reporting on the way aged care providers spend their funding, particularly on care activities and staff.



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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) is the national union for nurses (registered, enrolled, and assistants in nursing) in Australia, and the largest nursing professional association. The ANF has branches in each Australian State and Territory and has in excess of 140,000 members, working in the public, private and aged care sectors.