



**The PHARMACY GUILD of AUSTRALIA**

**Submission to the  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and  
Education References Committee:  
*Current and Future Skills Needs***

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia  
15 National Circuit Barton ACT 2600, PO Box 7036 Canberra Business Centre ACT 2610  
Phone 02 6270 1888 Fax 02 6270 1800 Email [guild.nat@guild.org.au](mailto:guild.nat@guild.org.au)

## **Executive Summary**

- The Guild is a Registered Training Organisation, as well as a peak industry body representing community pharmacies across the nation.
- Pharmacists have been identified as one of the health professions in short supply nationally, and that gap will widen over time in all pharmacy sectors and regions.
- The Guild manages a number of initiatives specifically aimed at easing the shortage of pharmacists in rural and regional Australia.
- The Guild overall supports the VET policy direction, providing close links with industry are maintained.

## **The Pharmacy Guild of Australia**

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia is an organisation of employers, registered under the Workplace Relations Act 1996. It was established in 1928 and since that time has represented the interests of the proprietors of community pharmacies. It exists for the protection and betterment of its members and to maintain community pharmacies as the most appropriate providers of primary health care to the community through optimum use therapeutic use of drugs, drug managements and related services.

Australia has the world's best system of access to medications through the unique network of 5,000 pharmacies, 1300 of which are located outside metropolitan areas. People get effective medications at very affordable prices, backed up by expert professional advice about the use and effects of the medication, just by walking into a pharmacy.

Community pharmacies are not only the most accessible health service in regional Australia, but in many cases are the only readily available health service in regional communities. They play a significant role in maintaining the excellent standard of service and access that the Australian community has to medications and pharmacist services.

The relationship between the pharmacist and their patients is an important factor in ensuring the quality use of medicines and a patient's continuing wellness. Pharmacists are trusted professionals and are often in touch with their patients on a daily basis.

In community pharmacy, pharmacy assistants carry out a critical role in support of pharmacists. Pharmacy assistants are often the first and last points of contact in the pharmacy, and they require strong communication skills to ensure they are able to interact with the wide variety of people who visit the pharmacy.

Pharmacy assistants act as a filter of information, ensuring that all customers requiring therapeutic advice or professional assistance are referred to the pharmacist. All of their work is carried out under the supervision of the pharmacist, and community pharmacies are unable to open their doors if a registered pharmacist is not on the premises.

## **The Guild's Involvement in Training**

The Guild has delivered training, particularly for pharmacy assistants, for many years. However, its real engagement with training began with the advent of the Training Reform Agenda in the early 1990's.

Prior to 1993, pharmacy assistants were classified as either junior or senior shop assistants. The Guild identified the need to recognise the unique combination of knowledge and skills required by pharmacy assistants, and incorporated work value standards into the relevant industrial awards.

The Guild then initiated the development of the National Competency Standards for Pharmacy Assistants, endorsed by the then National Training Board in 1993.

Once the Competency Standards for Pharmacy Assistants were in place, industrial awards were varied to include them and a career path was created. The Guild recognised that this needed to be supported by formal training, and provision for recognition of prior learning (RPL). RPL was particularly relevant to the existing workforce, many of whom had considerable experience in the industry.

The Guild developed the National Training Course for Pharmacy Assistants from the competency standards by as a result. This suite of five nationally accredited courses provided training for pharmacy assistants from Certificate I to Certificate III. Each qualification level was linked to an industrial classification, based on the competency standards.

The Guild also gained registration as a training provider, and began training in every state and territory under the auspices of the Australia Recognition Framework.

The Guild undertook the lengthy process to have its Certificate II and III courses approved for delivery as traineeships in every jurisdiction. This has proved a highly beneficial training model, which is most appropriate in an industry that values a combination of training and skills practice in a workplace environment.

An important aspect of the National Training Course for Pharmacy Assistants was the commitment by the Guild to provide access to training for every pharmacy assistant in Australia. This was achieved by developing a comprehensive set of training and assessment materials for distance education. This mode of training has been highly successful, and continues to receive support from pharmacies that cannot access training in a metropolitan area, or that require the flexibility afforded by distance education.

In 1998, the National Wholesale, Retail and Personal Services Industry Training Advisory Board (WRAPS) was commissioned by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) to determine the need for a Training Package for pharmacy. The Guild was represented on the committee, which decided that there was a need to update the 1993 competency standards and to create a Training Package for the industry.

From April 2000 until the endorsement of the Community Pharmacy Training Package in February 2002, the Guild was an active participant on the National Industry Reference Group, representing community pharmacy and ensuring that the Training Package reflected the requirements of the industry.

The Guild continues to hold Registered Training Organisation status, delivering training from the Community Pharmacy Training Package via mutual recognition in every state and territory. Again, the Guild has taken the initiative to ensure that the new Training Package

qualifications for community pharmacy may be accessed by way of traineeships in each jurisdiction.

The Guild is involved to a lesser degree in the education of pharmacists. However, as part of the Third Community Pharmacy Agreement with the Commonwealth Government, the Guild manages a number of initiatives specifically aimed at easing the shortage of pharmacists in rural and regional Australia. These initiatives will be discussed in more detail below.

### **Skills Shortages in Community Pharmacy**

Whilst this submission concentrates on vocational education and training (VET) sector training for pharmacy assistants, it is important to note that pharmacists have been identified by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) as one of the health professions that is in short supply nationally.

This is confirmed by research conducted in 1999 that investigated the supply and demand for pharmacists. A second round of research *A study of the demand and supply of pharmacists, 2000-2010*<sup>i</sup> is due to report in the near future.

The research indicates that the gap between the supply of pharmacists and the demand, will widen over time in all pharmacy sectors and all regions. However, it is evident that regional, rural and remote locations will continue to have more difficulty in attracting pharmacists.

In late 2001, DEST identified retail to be included in the National Industry Skills Initiative. The Guild was part of the Retail Industry Working Group set up to investigate the future skills needs for retail and a number of its specialty sectors such as community pharmacy.

The initial report had not been released at the time of writing, however it is clear from the preliminary work of the committee that there are significant barriers to attracting and maintaining sufficient people with appropriate attributes and skills for a career in retail.

Future research on pharmacy assistants is planned to complement the ongoing work of the Retail Industry Working Group. Anecdotal evidence from the Guild's Branches supports the notion that it is difficult to recruit and retain the calibre of staff required in the industry. This is particularly true of pharmacy assistants with higher levels of training.

An issue that has emerged from various sources is the fact that retail careers in any sector are not perceived to have high standing in the community. There is also some resistance from parents and school career advisors when it comes to considering any type of retail as a career for their daughter or son.

### **Effectiveness of Current Government Policies on Education and Training**

Overall, the national policy direction for VET is correct. This is illustrated by the mainly positive responses from industry and other stakeholders in the ANTA focus groups for the National VET Strategy 2004-2010<sup>ii</sup>. However, industry comments still pointed to the complexity of the system and the layers of bureaucracy to be navigated.

During the past two to three years, significant progress has been made in the pursuit of national consistency in VET across jurisdictions. However, there is still work to be done, and much of it is in areas that impact on employers and RTOs operating across state borders.

In general, the decision to move from a multiplicity of accredited courses to Training Packages was a positive one. One consequence for all participants in the training system has been confusion over the changes and a lack of direction and assistance with implementation. This has impacted on industry bodies such as the Guild, which tries to keep its members informed and on individual employers, students and RTOs.

Introduction of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) to improve the quality of training services has also been a positive initiative, but again, assistance and direction on implementation has been scanty and in many cases too late.

There is now a feeling of change fatigue amongst industry stakeholders and RTOs, and time should be allowed for a period of consolidation. This would provide an opportunity to find solutions to the many implementation issues that have arisen with Training Packages and the AQTF.

National promotion of VET as a pathway has focussed on New Apprenticeships, which are highly sought after by both employers and trainees due to the appropriateness of the training and employment model. However, there needs to be a focus on raising community perceptions of VET as a viable alternative to university, and a provider of relevant, employment related and practical skills.

### **Effectiveness of Industry Strategies to Meet Skill Needs**

As outlined above, the Guild is committed to ensuring that the needs of community pharmacy are well catered for in terms of training.

Education and training for pharmacists is of concern to the Guild, due to the current and growing shortage of pharmacists, particularly in rural and remote areas. The Rural and Remote Pharmacy Workforce Development Program and additional Third Community Pharmacy Agreement initiatives provide incentive and support to pharmacists in rural and remote areas.

Specific programs include: Placement/Internship allowances for undergraduate pharmacists who wish to undertake internships in remote areas; CPE Allowance Scheme which funds rural pharmacists to undertake training and development opportunities; Pharmacy Academics at University Departments of Rural Health facilitating practice development and continuing education for country pharmacists; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Scholarship Scheme which assists indigenous people to undertake pharmacy studies; and Rural Pharmacy Curriculum providing a national framework for curriculum design and implementation to include core competencies for country pharmacists.

These programs are only part of the Guild's commitment to finding strategies to address the future demand for pharmacists, and to ensure all pharmacists are well equipped for their challenging professional role.

The Guild's ongoing commitment to training and recognition for pharmacy assistants, and the maintenance of a meaningful career path in community pharmacy complement this.

As well as ensuring the Community Pharmacy Training Package meets the immediate needs of the industry, the Guild sought to ensure that it would meet the emerging needs of the pharmacy assistant role for the life of the Package.

The role of the pharmacist is increasingly moving toward professional services and greater interaction with patients, and this must be supported with access to well trained pharmacy staff. The Community Pharmacy Training Package aims to provide pharmacy assistants with the skill and knowledge they require to fulfil this role.

A Certificate IV in Community Pharmacy qualification was added to the Training Package to meet the emerging need for staff trained in front line management. This reflects the ongoing need for pharmacists to delegate those tasks which are able to be carried out by pharmacy assistants, in order to free their time for professional tasks.

In addition, the Guild has recently commissioned research into aspects of the community pharmacy business that could be delegated to pharmacy assistants. It is expected that the results of this research will inform the review of the Community Pharmacy Training Package and perhaps lead to additional units of competency being added to the revised Package.

Importantly, the Guild has stressed the need for qualifications in community pharmacy that have vocational outcomes, and train existing and aspiring pharmacy assistants for employment. This is supported by a competency based classification structure in industrial awards that ensures the career path is a tangible goal for pharmacy assistants.

Community pharmacy has embraced the concept of New Apprenticeships, because the model of combining structured training with on the job experience is one that is appropriate for the industry. Most (approximately 90%) trainees in pharmacy are either retained in the pharmacy where they completed their traineeship, or they move to another pharmacy.

As well as the high retention rate, the training provided enables trainees to move into other industries such as retail, or other customer service related industries where their skills can be utilised. Much of the training is unique to the industry, but a core of general skills add to the employability of pharmacy graduates.

As an industry group, the Guild has a vested interest in ensuring that appropriate training models and frameworks are in place for community pharmacy. However, our commitment goes beyond that, as we work to ensure employees in the industry have access to a career path and training leading to real job outcomes. We have been able to achieve this only within a VET system that is industry led, and it must continue to be so to ensure quality, relevant training is delivered.

### **Consultation Arrangements with Industry on Education and Training**

It is essential that Australia's world class, industry led VET system continues to have regular, meaningful input from industry. Only in this way can industry be assured that it is getting quality, relevant training and recognition products that meet its needs. Quite simply, industry

will not accept or use training products and systems that do not address its requirements, and provide flexibility.

Industry representation is critical during the development and review of Training Packages. By definition, Training Packages provide a framework of competencies relevant to an industry or group of job roles, they are designed as tools to define the skills required, and how those skills may be packaged into qualifications that are meaningful to the industry concerned.

Industry needs should not be crowded out by the bureaucratic requirements of state training authorities, nor should industry be made to accept a limited range of delivery options. These issues are prevalent when negotiating for the establishment of New Apprenticeship pathways, where the needs of industry can be consumed by the weight of bureaucracy. This is also where the needs of industry are most important.

The Guild is actively involved in providing information and feedback to government on the training needs of community pharmacy. We work with and advise Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in our own right as an industry representative body, as well as being represented on ITAB boards at the national and state level.

The Guild has found that involvement with the ITAB system has been a valuable opportunity to contribute to VET policy. The WRAPS ITAB, with which the Guild has had a long association, has a strong network and sound relationships between national and state bodies.

This successful and productive network is now threatened by cuts to state ITAB funding by the Commonwealth, and by the recent ANTA review of national ITABs. Unfortunately, this may mean that beneficial results produced by some ITABs are lost due to the poor performance of others.

### **Conclusions –**

Australia's VET system is world class, largely due to its close links with industry and a commitment to meet the complementary needs of employers, enterprises and VET students. An industry-led VET system will ensure that a nationally consistent training framework will remain relevant and of a high quality. Expanding career paths and training opportunities, particularly at higher skill levels, may assist a national strategy to address skill shortages in the future.

---

<sup>i</sup> Health Care Intelligence Pty Ltd, 2002

<sup>ii</sup> ANTA 2002