

Submission to Senate Committee Inquiry.

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References and
Legislation Committees for Enquiry.

7 November 2005

Prepared by:

NSWNA Branch Delegates Sonya Jones and Linda Kelly on behalf of the
Concord Hospital Branch of the NSW Nurses' Association. We are both
prepared to be interviewed if necessary for the Senate Inquiry.
The branch has approximately 750 members and this submission is authorised
by E Villanueva, branch secretary.

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Nurses employed in the NSW Public Sector are not direct employees of the Crown. Unlike NSW teachers and NSW police they are employed by area health services trading as corporations.

Choice of Workplace Agreement

Members of the current Branch Executive had experience in the early nineties with enterprise agreements and the obvious main argument of seeking such agreement by the employer was to reduce ongoing costs of nursing salaries. This would be by reducing or eliminating penalty and overtime payment. Negotiation meetings with branch delegates from hospitals within our public hospital area health service and area health executives (employed on contract and paid bonuses for meeting budget targets) were not successful, and only our then General Secretary of the union was able to command respect and negotiate a good outcome for nurses in regard to penalty and overtime payments.

Given this past experience, and our experience as a branch whereby human resources departments will take advantage and exploit any opportunity with individual nurses working to a strong award, we do not feel confident that individual nurses will be able to negotiate a fair contract. Nurses have a great respect and recognition in the community for their work, however very few people, in particular health administrators, have an insight into the day to day realities of nurses' work. Yet people like health administrators are consistently trying to squeeze more productivity out of nurses or look for alternative workforce models that encompass a reduction of experienced nurses and replacement with a cheaper inexperienced workforce.

Nurses will not tolerate further avenues of exploitation, particularly one that effects their work satisfaction and their physical, mental and emotional capacity. Therefore the branch advocates that nurses are employed and supported under a strong award negotiated by their union. Without this, there would be a significant risk of not having a nursing workforce at all to negotiate any individual contracts.

Retention of Penalties, Overtime and Allowances

Without shift penalties, overtime and other allowances, and we have 50 clauses in the current NSW Public Hospital Nurses' (State) Award, it has been estimated that nurses could loose up to 33% of their take home pay. Who will want to nurse then?

What incentive or reward will there be at all for nurse to work evening shifts, weekends, night duty and public holidays? These shifts are difficult to roster and

with less available support resources available for these shifts, nurses significantly incur more responsibilities. Appropriate shift penalties make these shifts more acceptable for nurses. Ask any nurse and they would easily recall at least one shocking story to share with you regarding any of these shifts and the situation they faced with very little support.

Research conducted by Buchanan and Considine¹, 2002, clearly identified shift work as a source of dissatisfaction for the nursing profession. Many nurses interviewed noted that shift work was problematic in their lives, that it was not healthy, rosters gave little inflexibility, and the hours were unsocial. Many nurses on this study expressed frustrations that they were not being accordingly remunerated to the conditions they worked in, and for the skills and responsibilities required for the job. Without shift penalty's etc, the branch feels that given the extra responsibility carried by nurses working those shifts, nurses will feel that they have to get out.

There is strong argument that penalty payment for shifts keeps nurses in nursing. Today's young nurse finds it very difficult to come to work on Friday and Saturday nights when their friends are out partying. Nurses with young families are an essential part of our rosters, providing flexibility to rosters by working the shifts that attract a penalty. Without penalty payments the branch feels that NSW would not be able to supply a nursing service to meet the community demand.

Working hours and Impact on Families

Penalty payments enable nurses, a predominantly female workforce, to work less hours and be with their families. The elimination of penalty payments and overtime will have a variable effect on nurses' working hours and impact on their families. For example, part time nurses and mothers may have to increase their working hours and this in turn will decrease their family hours. Other nurses may simply leave the nursing workforce for less stressful employment where they feel more valued. This will leave those nurses left behind under pressure to increase their working hours, work longer days and more unpaid overtime than they already work, in turn decreasing their family time.

Nursing work is unrelenting, physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting. Can a health care system and the public of Australia afford nurses to be working more tired than they already are?

¹ Buchanan, J., Considine, G. 2002. "Stop telling us to cope! NSW nurses explain why they are leaving the profession". ACIRRT, University of Sydney.