

This Consensus Statement reflects the position of the Australian Nursing Federation, the Australian Practice Nurses Association, the Australian Nurse Practitioner Association, Royal College of Nursing, *Australia* and the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses in relation to the role of the advanced registered nurse and nurse practitioner in primary health care.



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Advanced registered nurse and nurse practitioner role in primary health care

Primary health care, as identified in the 1978 international Treaty of Alma Ata, recognises the inseparability of health from the social, environmental and economic factors that affect human life.

It is characterised by a focus on the promotion of health and the prevention of illness, according to principles of equity, access, and community empowerment, and achieved by care delivered by multidisciplinary teams. It differs from the Australian concept of "primary care", familiar to most Australians as a trip to their General Practitioner. Primary care is better described as a "first contact" care, involving "a single service or intermittent management of a person's specific illness or disease condition in a service that is typically contained to a time-limited appointment".¹

The health reform agenda in Australia offers a unique opportunity to consider an alternative model of primary health care that extends beyond the services of a general practitioner to a multidisciplinary model to offer comprehensive primary health care services.

The current system of primary care funding in Australia creates serious barriers to effective health promotion and chronic disease management, and is limiting its effectiveness in terms of equity, access and value for money. Major reform is needed to achieve a model of care that is based on the best available evidence, is efficient and cost effective and provides for positive patient outcomes and sustainable service delivery models.

Expanding the role of nursing in primary health care is increasingly being identified internationally as essential to achieving improved population health outcomes and improving access to primary health care services. An expanded role for nurses enables services to focus on the prevention of illness and health promotion, and offers an opportunity to improve the management of chronic disease as well as reduce demand on the acute hospital sector.

For registered nurses and nurse practitioners to work to the full scope of their practice in the delivery of primary health care services in Australia, professional and legislative barriers to their practice must be overcome.

Registered nurses are autonomous health care professionals who provide care in collaboration with other health professionals and individuals requiring nursing care. Legislation and regulation guide nursing practice. Registered nurses, as qualified licensed professionals, are required to be accountable and responsible for their own actions. As such nurses are entitled to identify the nursing care which they are educated, competent and authorised to provide. Nurses are held accountable for their practice by the nurse regulatory

¹ Keleher, H. (2001) 'Why primary health care offers a more comprehensive approach for tackling health inequities than primary care'. *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, vol 7 (2), 57-61.

authorities, whose role is to protect the public, as is the case for all other regulated health professions.

As regulated health professionals, registered nurses are not 'supervised' nor do they provide care 'for and on behalf of' any other health care professional. Nurses acknowledge that all health care is a collaborative endeavour focused on positive outcomes for individuals and groups.

Advanced registered nurses are prepared for evidence based practice through post registration education, and accept responsibility for complex situations which may encompass clinical, managerial, educational or research contexts. They provide leadership, initiate change and practise comprehensively as an interdependent member of the team. These nurses have particular breadth and depth of experience and knowledge in their field of practice. Where appropriate, these advanced registered nurses may seek authorisation or endorsement as a nurse practitioner.

The nurse practitioner role is differentiated by their extended practice in the areas of advanced clinical assessment, prescribing, referral and diagnostics. Whilst there are around 300 authorised or endorsed nurse practitioners in Australia approximately half of these nurses are employed in nurse practitioner positions and even less are practising to the full scope of their role. Some of the restrictions on nurse practitioner practice are the inability for patients to receive subsidised medicines if prescribed by a nurse practitioner (as distinct from a medical practitioner) or rebates from Medicare for nurse practitioner services, limiting their practice and reducing patients' access to affordable, high quality health care.

Advanced registered nurses and nurse practitioners are ideally placed to deliver primary health care in Australia. Nurses in primary health care will not replace other health professionals but will (and do) provide a unique service that they are already well prepared and qualified to offer. This will enable the community to access a level of primary health care that is currently not available to the Australian population.

The legal capacity of professional nurses to make autonomous decisions needs to be acknowledged at policy level by facilitating access to publicly funded primary health care services and medications provided by nurses.

There is urgent need and immense benefit in reforming primary health care in Australia to fully utilise the expert and effective role of nurses. There is a strong potential not only to deliver improved health outcomes for the community, but also to positively impact national productivity through the utilisation of nurses - the largest professional health workforce in the country.

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