

I welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Caring for Older Australians.

As a nurse or midwife currently working in the health system I have a vested interest in ensuring the care that's provided to older Australians within this system is of the highest quality.

The recent federal budget commitment for aged care goes some way in addressing a number of critical issues affecting the industry – particularly the funding for education of existing staff and for the examination of a national regulation system for aged care workers.

However, further reform of the aged care industry is still very much needed, and well overdue, to ensure our aged care system can meet the challenges facing it in coming decades.

Keep nursing in aged care by reversing the decline in Registered Nurse and Enrolled Nurse numbers through regulated skills mix ratios

In 2003 there were 27,210 (FTE) registered and enrolled nurses in the aged care sector¹. In 2007 that number had dropped to 23,103 (FTE)². That's a decline of over 4100 (FTE) nurses, which is a decrease of 23 percent in registered nurses and 11 percent in enrolled nurses.

There needs to be more, not less, RNs and ENs employed in aged care – and at all times of day – to ensure there is the right mix of skills in the nursing team so quality time and care can be provided to each resident.

Assistants in Nursing (AIN) and Personal Carers (PCs), which are increasing in numbers in aged care, are doing an outstanding job under very difficult circumstances. But AINs need the support of skilled RNs and ENs to ensure quality care is provided to every resident.

Footnote 1&2: Access Economics (2009) *Nurses in Residential Aged Care*, Report for the Australian Nursing Federation, p. 10.

There is Australian research that discusses the barriers for care provision in aged care facilities that examines the impact this has on the residents and the carers. The barriers are numerous and include staff expertise, skill mix, language barriers, funding and systems barriers.

The Australian NHMRC Palliative Care guidelines make many recommendations regarding provision of care for palliative care patients however there needs to be adequate funding and systems in place to ensure transparency of service provision.

As part of my current study in palliative care in severe dementia (QUT) we discuss many of these issues as reasons why we have difficulty providing excellence of care. It really is frightening when we look at the impact on residents, and worrying that we are unable to attract and retain skilled staff to these areas.

Aged care facilities are only one care environment that needs to be considered. The demands on nurses in acute settings also impact their ability & willingness to engage with elderly residents for fear of being 'caught up'. It is so difficult to spend the time doing all the incidental care for people when there are critical tasks that need to be attended to. In addition, due to the skills deficits and workloads on staff in aged care facilities, residents are often transferred to acute facilities for care. This is not always ideal for residents or families and places significant burden on the acute services.

Speaking from personal experience, (as a relative of a person who was in an ACF due to the need for palliative care) I acknowledge the dedication of carers. However, I am very concerned about the skill and available time for staff to provide this extremely complex

and important end of life care. The fact that I was able to advocate on my relative's behalf was good for him however I am really concerned about all the other residents who don't have someone with the skills and knowledge to do this for them.

The Issues are many and complex. I feel very strongly that **IT IS TIME** to provide equitable pay for nurses working in aged care so that we can attract and retain skilled professionals, that all care staff are recognised and remunerated as nurses, that ongoing education is provided (and supported by the providers) for nurses in aged care facilities, staffing ratios need to be determined in line with best practice and that facilities are held accountable to ensure compliance, and that providers are forced to be accountable for the funds provided to them in a transparent manner.

I fail to understand how it can not be obvious to the governing bodies that this situation needs to be remedied **NOW**.

Protect the integrity of nursing and ensure quality care for aged care residents by ensuring all people who provide nursing care are licensed

Aged care should be delivered by licensed nursing staff to ensure the professionalism of the aged care sector.

Assistants in Nursing and care staff should be recognised for their professional skills through a national licensing system.

Close the wages gap to retain and recruit quality staff

Nurses working in aged care are paid significantly less than their counterparts in other sectors.

In fact aged care nurses earn, on average, about \$300 a week less than their colleagues working in other areas of the health system. Yet they have undertaken the same training and education and have equivalent nurse qualifications, experience and workloads as public sector nurses.

Aged care providers claim funding mechanisms in aged care have hampered their ability to provide pay parity. However there is currently no requirement on operators to spend any of their government funding on direct care or even wages.

This disparity in wages makes it increasingly difficult to attract sufficient nurses to the sector.

There must be better wages in aged care to keep nurses in the sector.

Ensure transparency and accountability for the funding provided for the care of residents

The federal government funds nursing homes but does not place requirements on nursing home owners to show how much is spent on direct care including nurses' wages.

A clearly defined amount of funding needs to be allocated to staffing and direct care services. Residents need to be allocated a set number of hours of staff time according to the level of care they require.

A process must be established and enforced to ensure aged care providers are accountable for government funding and transparent in how that funding is spent.