

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.

Since the implementation of 'ageing in place', low care facilities are now increasingly under pressure with workload issues and yet the skill mix is that there is less RN's / EEN's compared to unregulated care workers. The big question remains... what % of residents in the now defunct 'low care facilities' (who are now high care ACFI assessed) constitutes a greater need for care funding, as no one has bothered to address this issue head on!

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.

Unregulated care workers are not registered and so too, are not given the incentive or opportunities for professional development. Yet they are administering medications and attending to high care residents under ageing in place with less and less clinical supervision. If this continues, the acute care sector will be under enormous pressure trying to deal with residents who could easily be managed in residential facilities, given the appropriate clinical skills and staff. In addition indirect supervision by an RN SHOULD not include phone contact.

This is happening on many occasions and care workers are left to make clinical decisions, based on a blasé phone assessment by a nurse who has not seen the resident at all.

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.

All nurses irrespective of workplace should be remunerated on an equal basis. There should be greater incentive then to apply for advanced practice roles and/or endorsement to ensure quality care and retention in the aged care sector. Aged care nursing is a speciality that requires an understanding of multiple system failure and chronic care strategies, to ensure residents do not rely on GP's alone and or/ acute care to manage their health care needs. Please understand this... as it seems we as aged care nurses, are deemed as a futile commodity that has no place in the provision of quality care to older Australians.

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.

Under current arrangements, providers are not obligated or encouraged to disclose what % of funding goes directly to care services or for that matter professional development. This allows providers to 'rob peter and pay paul' wherever they see fit. This in turn disadvantages the consumer, of who is the reason why the funding is there in the first place. Is this not truly absurd??