

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

As a registered nurse currently working in the residential aged care system I have a keen 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 employed in residential aged care – and at all times of day – to ensure there is the right mix of skills in the nursing team.

The trend in recent years has been for ENs/ PCs to be placed in-charge of 30 or more bed units instead of RNs, a position not suited to their qualifications or experience. The result I see is enormous stress on these staff, and on the RNs who are trying to assist them / intervene where necessary in addition to managing their own allocated workload. RNs are quite simply leaving aged care under these conditions and I see this impacting the standard of care.

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

In my experience, different high care facilities have been arranging their skills mix in vastly different ways, even though the residents they care for are increasingly and uniformly in need of complex high care. It would seem that the only way to manage this to the benefit of residents at this point is to include specific ratios of skilled staff to residents at each skill level.

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

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, in some states and territories, 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 and conditions 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.

Ensure a constant high standard of care within the Accreditation framework.

The Accreditation system, as I have experienced it over time, has evolved from a process-orientated to a more outcomes-orientated system and now also includes greater emphasis on 'spot' support visits in its effort to maintain high standards in aged care. I support these changes and hope that they continue.