

Nursing and midwifery skill mix

Introduction

The expansion of nursing and midwifery skills within the health care industry has gained momentum in the last few years. The changing need for health care, new technology, increasing acuity in patients, nursing and midwifery shortages and the need to contain costs have meant that a health facility's skill mix – the most appropriate mix of staff required to provide the safe quality care – is a critical aspect of workforce planning and utilisation.

To meet these needs, some employers have segmented professional nursing and midwifery practice into tasks, which has created new job designs and opportunities for unlicensed practitioners. This trend has produced further demands, challenges and opportunities for the nursing and midwifery professions to define professional practice boundaries and safe, quality care.

Purpose

This policy sets out the principles the QNU believes governments and employers should adopt in determining the most appropriate nursing and midwifery skill mix for each context of care. This policy should be read in conjunction with the Nursing and Midwifery Workforce Planning and the Nursing and Midwifery Workload Management policies.

Skill needs, skill mix and patient outcomes

As professional nursing and midwifery activities become more evidence-based and more knowledge-intensive, there has been a corresponding rise in the requirements for formal qualifications and professional standardisation of nursing and midwifery skills. Increased patient acuity and shortened lengths of stay in facilities as well as a renewed focus on primary and preventative health care, have changed the way in which individual nurses and midwives practice and the nursing and midwifery profession. It is therefore likely that more acutely ill patients requiring more complex interventions and treatment regimens in shorter periods of time will have a significant impact on expected nursing and midwifery workloads, and create the need for more rather than less skilled staff (Aiken et al. 2002, Duffield and O'Brien-Pallas, 2002).

In Queensland there is continuing inadequate skill mix to meet the daily needs of patients/clients, particularly in the aged care sector. Lack of registered nurses, too few relief staff and funding shortfalls are the major contributing factors to an inappropriate skill mix resulting in a negative impact on nursing and midwifery workloads (Hegney et al, 2008).

While the drivers for determining and adjusting skill mix come from a number of sources, the most prevalent influence to date has been financial constraints. The notion of expanded and extended practice for registered nurses and midwives ostensibly provides opportunities for less skilled workers to undertake the more routine aspects of nursing care so that the registered nurse or midwife is effectively employed in more complex practice activities. The QNU believes that creating an optimal minimum skill mix for each context of care relies

primarily on the utilisation of nurses and midwives practicing to their full scope of practice, and secondly on economic constraints. Replacing registered nurses/midwives with unregulated workers may yield immediate cost savings, but will have long term implications on the provision of safe, qualitative care, staff services and the effectiveness of our national health system. Employers must be responsible for ensuring appropriate skill mix and models of nursing and midwifery and minimising the risk to patients through increased staff churn.

Evidence confirms a direct relationship between the registered nurse and midwifery workforce and positive patient outcomes (Duffield et al, 2005, Duffield et al, 2007). The QNU believes that the following factors will contribute to positive patient outcomes:

Governments

- » Governments and health care providers must undertake rigorous and comprehensive workforce planning to meet both the current and future demands on each service and the changing needs of the client groups;
- » Governments must invest significantly in nursing and midwifery education to ensure lifelong learning and continuous professional development is available to support changes in nursing and midwifery professional practice;
- » Governments must ensure clinical placements for students are available and supported to meet the needs of growing service demands;
- » Governments must implement measures to facilitate the smooth transition of newly graduated nurses and midwives to the workforce, including strategies that optimise their employment;
- » Governments must ensure incorporation of nurse and midwife sensitive indicators within the national standards framework for safety and quality;
- » Governments must establish regulatory frameworks that actively support appropriate skill mix and regulate all staff providing direct clinical care to patients/residents.

Employers

- » Employers should embrace a holistic and integrated approach in developing service models and in the management of patient care that provides systematic and continuous patient support;
- » Employers must ensure opportunities are available to optimise the scope of practice of nurses and midwives in the delivery of patient care and be responsible for providing their ongoing professional development and access to formal study programs;
- » Employers must provide adequate resourcing for clinical infrastructure and supervision of nurses and midwives;
- » Employers should include the principals of primary health care in the development of service models and incorporate the full potential of contemporary nursing and midwifery practice within the skill mix and in multidisciplinary teams;
- » Employers must work collaboratively with nursing and midwifery professionals, including through agreed consultative mechanisms, to create a culture of change under which the new roles and responsibilities, models of care and innovation in actual care provision can develop;
- » Employers must acknowledge the responsibility of licensed practitioners to determine the most appropriate skill mix within the model of nursing and midwifery for the particular service;
- » Employers must remunerate all nurses and midwives undertaking extended practice activities or expanded responsibilities as well as those with advanced experience;
- » Employers must develop long term retention and recruitment strategies based on an appropriate skill mix for each area of service which includes safe ratios of licensed nurses and midwives are available to plan, supervise and delegate care. Employers must not employ an unregulated workforce to carry out these activities;
- » Employers must ensure that their nursing and midwifery staff has a safe practice environment. They should therefore plan the skill mix according to the requirements that the nursing and midwifery staff determine;
- » Employers must recognise and accommodate the expanded level of autonomy of the nursing and midwifery practice.

Nurses and midwives

- » Nurses and midwives should be responsible for the development of care plans for each patient/client which support co-ordinated continuous care and include other disciplines as required;

- » Nurses and midwives should determine the skill mix required for patient care unrestricted by financial constraints or employer preferences;
- » Nurses and midwives must have access to suitable career pathways through industrial instruments which include generic level statements to maintain professional nursing and midwifery practice;
- » Nurses and midwives have a shared responsibility with the employer in maintaining safe standards of professional nursing and midwifery practice.

References

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