

## **Submission to Productivity Commission Study into the health Workforce**

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### **GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIAL WORK**

This is a brief submission asking that the workforce issue of gerontological social work practice and training be considered in your study.

Gerontological social work is social work with the aged and their families and significant others, and aims at enhancing and maintaining the well-being of all older Australians.

While social workers have long worked with older people, especially those who were poor, gerontological social work is the continuation of that practice and commitment, but aimed at addressing the needs of our unprecedented ageing population. Social workers working in health care, especially in hospitals, are more than likely to be working with older people, due to the latter's prevalence in acute and sub-acute beds. These workers play a major role in hospital discharge planning, which in turn has a considerable impact on health expenditure due to the cost of hospital beds. This practice will grow substantially in the coming years as the population continues to age.

Thus, this submission suggests that a greater training and preparatory effort be made in the near future to ensure appropriate numbers of gerontological social workers are trained and available for this challenging work.

I am currently undertaking research investigating the skills and knowledge required by gerontological social workers to work effectively with older people in health and community settings. (see attached powerpoint presentation.) The results from this research will be fed back to our university course to see if the academic preparation matches the skills and knowledge required by employers of gerontological social workers, such as acute hospitals, and whether other workforce training is required.

In the USA, through the John Hartford Foundation, substantial additional training funds have been committed to the development and training of gerontological social workers. I believe we need a similar initiative in Australia to prepare for the health needs of older people, and that government could play a role in facilitating such an initiative.

While I have previously looked at how many social workers are currently practising (McCormack 2001), the task of estimating additional numbers of gerontological social workers is difficult. I am currently looking at some American data on how they established some workforce benchmarks for gerontological social work. I know that anecdotally hospital employers find it difficult to recruit skilled and experienced social work graduates for this work. Also, from my annual graduate social work employment survey at Latrobe I know that on average about 10-15% of our graduates are employed in health settings each year and that up to one quarter of our annual 100 graduates are employed in health and welfare agencies where many older people attend.

In conclusion, because the health system of the future will cater in very large part to older people, it seems appropriate to ensure we have a workforce with the skills and knowledge to match those needs, and the development of gerontological social work will be a part of that development.

**References**

**McCormack J** (2001), How many social workers now? A review of census and other data, *Australian Social Work*, Vol 54, No 3, pp 63 – 72.