Health is a Human Right: Access, Investment and Economic Growth is the International Council of Nurses’ (ICN) International Nurses Day (IND) theme for 2018. The theme examines opportunities to improve health care access and outcomes through applying a human rights approach to health systems development.\(^1\)

Health is a human right

Health is a human right, applying a human rights based approach to health care places onus on society to take action to make appropriate health care equally available to everyone, particularly when most needed.\(^2\) As a declared human right, attaining health becomes a protected and promoted societal expectation setting standards for government and stakeholder accountability. Health as a human right must form a foundational principle of Australia’s health system to protect and uphold our principles of universal health care. Setting health as a human right provides a powerful mechanism for community empowerment by enabling people to understand and exercise their rights to health, to pursue complaints and to address health care systems’ non-compliance.

The role of nurses in the right to health

A human rights approach to health is the philosophical basis of nursing in Australia.\(^3\) Whether clinicians, educators, administrators, researchers or policymakers, Australian nurses advocate for the protection of health as a human right through the provision of holistic, person-centred, evidence-based health care that prioritises safety, quality and access equity.

Nurses can lead and support health systems in applying a right-to-health approach across all areas of health care. Understanding issues of health care systems ACCESS, INVESTMENT and ECONOMIC GROWTH informs nursing practice and contributions to health care policy development.

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Access
Health systems that incorporate a human rights approach prioritise health care access. Access is “the opportunity to reach and obtain appropriate health care services in situations of perceived need for care.”\(^4\)

Determinants of health care access include:

1. **Public awareness** - Appropriate services exist and people are willing and know how to use them.
2. **Service capability to meet diverse needs** - Health care services are non-discriminatory, aim to protect human rights and take an approach that seeks to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with culturally safe and appropriate, effective and responsive health care.
3. **Easy service reach** - Services are available, easy to reach and act to breakdown service barriers associated with geographic remoteness and/or social isolation.
4. **Affordable health care** - Ability to pay does not present a barrier to receiving necessary quality health care.
5. **Availability of safe and quality care** - Poor quality health care can lead to poor health outcomes and harm; promoting access does not diminish the safety of care.
6. **Timely access** - Timely service delivery promotes health care accessibility.
7. **People-centred health care** - Optimising participation of a person in their health care is a human right.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Ibid.


\(^5\) Ibid.
Nurses: A voice to lead  Health is a human right: Access, investment and economic growth

Nurses in Australia are at the forefront of health care and are able to transform health care systems to improve access through a human rights approach. Nurses are patient advocates, and act in the best interest of health care consumers. Advocacy drives nurses to develop efficient, effective and sustainable models of care making nurses crucial to the health care reform agenda.

ACN has launched four Inaugural Policy Chapters in recognition of the constantly changing landscape of the provision of patient care and services within the Australian health care system:

• Workforce Sustainability
• Healthy Ageing
• Chronic Disease
• End of Life Care

ACN’s Policy Chapters will provide opportunities for nursing leaders and experts to inform change and guide future directions through collaboration. Policy Chapters will focus on a priority issue and draw on the specialised skills and expertise of ACN members and external stakeholders to work with and influence government and policy makers.

Investment and economic growth

Investment in nursing can influence the determinants of health for individuals and groups leading to positive health, social and economic benefits. Investment in good health systems, including health workforce development, is a means to a prosperous economy. Worldwide, people place high value on good health. Governments and decision-makers must recognise that investing in quality health systems, including investing in nurse workforce development, is an important contributor to economic growth and social development.

Economic investments that enable a human rights approach to health care support improved and sustainable health care access. Key economic policy drivers include:

1. Universal Health Coverage (UHC) – Access to UHC better protects vulnerable people and supports healthier and more productive communities.

2. People-centred care – This approach can redirect funding and change health care service models and outcome measures to prioritise patient experiences, public health promotion and equity in health care access.

3. Human resources for health – A sustainable health system requires an appropriately skilled workforce enabled to work to their full scope of practice, that is organised and deployed in innovative ways focusing on primary health care, prevention and health care management.

Nurse leaders are routinely responsible for the financial and administrative oversight of health services. They possess requisite clinical expertise and financial management knowledge to direct limited health resources and are key decision-makers across health service directorates.

Nurse leaders are uniquely skilled and positioned within health policy and process environments to reduce systems fragmentation; identify, inform and implement health systems improvements to drive service improvements; and to promote service safety and quality. They are, potentially, the most efficient means of formulating as well as delivering many health care services and service innovations and are central to applying a human rights approach to health care service delivery.

Investing in the nurse workforce must be a key policy driver to support health as a human right.