



Australian College of Nursing

AGED CARE SOLUTIONS

EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP

PERSPECTIVE BRIEF

AGED CARE REFORM –
RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACTION

Australian College of Nursing Aged Care Reform – Recommendations to Action

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KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is committed to ensuring the nursing profession is empowered to lead a system redesign in aged care that delivers safe, quality, culturally responsive and person-centred care¹ to all older people in Australia². Nurses have a critical role in providing quality and safe aged care that includes: contributing to clinical governance systems, upholding older peoples' rights to dignity, respect and autonomy and making care decisions consistent with their values and goals; and delivering quality, safe care to the older person, no matter where they live³. ACN considers nursing leadership⁴ in clinical governance as fundamental; in both driving much needed reform, and delivering care that meets the increasingly complex and diverse needs of the older person.

PURPOSE

This Perspective Brief has been developed to highlight the significant leadership role nurses have in shaping an aged care system that not only overcomes the failures in the current aged care system, but provides a clear roadmap for a system redesign. It is intended to provide the government with a way forward; ensuring nurses are equipped and supported to deliver the care required for Australia's ageing population, address the associated rise in complex, co-morbid conditions, and reduce the strain on the broader health care system⁵.

BACKGROUND

The Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety was tabled on 1 March 2021 and included 148 recommendations to address systemic failures in the aged care system⁶. The Final Report endorsed a 'rights-based approach', placing the needs and preferences of the older person at the centre of the aged care system. The recommendations proposed a range of solutions including legislative, regulatory, clinical, staffing, funding, oversight, reporting and research and development changes.

A WAY FORWARD

ACN considers the following priorities essential to sustainable, effective and rights-based aged care reform:

- Immediate action to ensure registered nurses⁷, enrolled nurses and unregulated health care workers⁸ are enabled to provide quality, safe⁹ and culturally responsive¹⁰ care to the older person. This can be achieved through dynamic staffing¹¹ based on the skills mix required to meet the acuity, complexity and diversity¹² of the older person.
- Expansion of evidence-based in-home care to ensure older people are supported and cared for in their own homes for as long as possible, no matter where they live¹³. Nurses play a critical role in hospital and residential care avoidance through expert assessment, health promotion, care planning and ongoing monitoring.
- To improve the quality and safety of aged care and services and ensure person-centred care, clinical governance¹⁴ must be a key focus of aged care reform. This can be achieved by enabling nursing leadership across all facets of the aged care system, including legislation, regulation, case management and care delivery.

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

In the following table, ACN outlines in greater detail the priorities that require the most urgent, meaningful action, and the Royal Commission recommendations most relevant to the proposed actions.

ACN recognises the Australian Government has responded to some elements of the Royal Commission's recommendations in their Federal Budget 2021-22 aged care reform initiatives. These elements have been marked in the table with an asterisk (*), though ACN notes several key priorities have yet to be addressed.

This includes the provision for a registered nurse to be on staff at all times, as part of an adaptive workforce model that reflects the complex and diverse needs of the older person.

ACN has long advocated for aged care staffing that provides the skill mix required to meet the needs of the older person. ACN does not believe minimum care minutes will provide the level of safe and highly-skilled care required in aged care. Older Australians living with complex conditions or co-morbidities, particularly those at the end of their lives can deteriorate rapidly and unexpectedly. The government's proposal for 200 care minutes per resident per day, with 40 minutes provided by an RN does not appear to be based on the best evidence. Likewise, the proposal for an RN to be on-site for just 16 hours per day will leave older Australians vulnerable to dying in pain or alone, if the end of their life happens to coincide with the 8 hours a facility is not staffed by an RN.

Table 1. Recommendations requiring immediate action

PRIORITY	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
Evidence-based and dynamic staffing in residential aged care that reflects the skills required to provide safe, quality and culturally responsive care for increasingly complex conditions and populations, including the provision for a minimum of a registered nurse to be available and on-staff at all times ¹⁵ .	5, 16, 75-79, 80-83, 86, 122
Expand support for in-home care, both to promote greater independence, autonomy and self-determination for the older person, while reducing pressure on residential aged care and the broader health care system*. This should be based both on meeting the acuity, complexity and diversity of needs, and the workforce required.	8, 35, 36, 39, 40, 41, 54, 62, 63, 118
Regulation, registration and mandatory training* in essential elements of quality aged care (dementia, human rights, infection prevention and control) for the unregulated health care workforce ¹⁶ . This includes a minimum of a Cert III in Individual Support and preferably a Cert IV in Ageing Support.	5, 16
Improve the regulatory and complaints processes to ensure both accountability of aged care providers and the opportunity for consumers and carers to submit complaints and have these responded to in a timely and effective manner*.	10, 98-100
Expansion of current mandatory quality indicators* to ensure the needs and preferences of the older person are met in any care setting ¹⁷ .	22-23

MEDIUM-TERM PRIORITIES

In the following table, ACN provides greater detail regarding the priorities considered medium-term. These must be implemented within the next two to four years and are essential to the long-term sustainability of Australia's aged care system.

ACN recognises the Australian Government has responded to some elements of the Royal Commission's recommendations in their Federal Budget 2021-22 aged care reform initiatives. These elements have been marked in the table with an asterisk (*), though ACN notes several key priorities have yet to be addressed.

This includes the need for tangible strategies to attract and retain a highly-skilled and committed workforce; raising the profile of gerontological nurse specialists to ensure professional parity and workforce sustainability; and establishing a designated Gerontological Nursing Research Scheme to establish a growing evidence-base to guide best practice.

Table 2: Recommendations requiring medium-term action

PRIORITY	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
Increased funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of the aged care workforce, including fair wages and employment conditions, scholarships, transition to practice programs and continuing professional development*.	75-79, 80-83, 114
Reduce the number of young people in residential aged care and ensure their access to appropriate accommodation and care services*.	74
Raise the profile of aged care to ensure professional parity, workforce sustainability and the highest possible standards in meeting the needs of the older person and their families.	26, 84-85
Establish a permanent, designated Gerontological Nursing Research Scheme to support Gerontological Nursing research by Gerontological Nursing experts, leaders and clinicians. Practice will be based on the best available evidence to ensure that optimal quality of care is provided to older Australians.	8, 107-108
Ensure people living in residential aged care are provided with appropriate services that meets their needs and preferences including healthy food, timely access to nursing and allied health professionals* and support to live comfortable and meaningful lives including access to reablement programs and end of life care ¹⁸ .	33, 36, 38, 58
Enable the provision of nurses to assess and manage complexity of need for consumers receiving in-home care.	16, 28, 56

LONG-TERM VISION

In the following table, ACN outlines those priorities considered essential to system redesign in the aged care system. While these are just as critical as those provided in Tables 1 and 2, ACN believes these should underpin the long-term vision of aged care. ACN recognises the Australian Government has responded to some elements of the Royal Commission's recommendations in their Federal Budget 2021-22 aged care reform initiatives. These elements have been marked in the table with an asterisk (*), though ACN notes several key priorities have yet to be addressed.

This includes the need for robust clinical governance frameworks, where nursing leadership influences all aspects of the system, from legislative and regulatory bodies, to case management and clinical decision-making. Nurse-led aged clinical governance will also mean a greater emphasis on prevention, health promotion and health literacy within the community¹⁹, preserving quality of life for the older person for as long as possible, while reducing the burden on the broader health care system.

Table 3: Recommendations to underpin a sustainable, safe and person centred aged care system

PRIORITY	RELEVANT RECOMMENDATIONS
Develop and promote clinical governance frameworks with nursing leadership and expertise to influence legislative, regulatory and clinical decision-making bodies. This includes nursing representation in development of the new Aged Care Act.	1, 5-6, 29, 31, 69, 89, 90, 97
Improve support from general practice services in residential aged care, including MBS funding for regular health checks and care by Nurse Practitioners.	56, 57, 61
Improve transparency and accountability mechanisms to ensure standards are met, Royal Commission recommendations are addressed, and prudential regulation and financial oversight is maintained*.	133-137, 143, 145-148
Enable systems to support nurses to undertake health promotion ²⁰ and health literacy work in the community to reduce hospitalisation and admission to residential aged care.	N/A

CONCLUSION

ACN believes the Australian Government has a responsibility to all Australians to ensure the findings of the Royal Commission are translated into clear, tangible and effective actions; and urgently. The Federal Government's 2021-2022 Budget is a critical opportunity to shift from a market-oriented approach to the Royal Commission's proposed rights-based approach. The safety and wellbeing of older Australians depends on decisive, systemic reform; we cannot afford to perpetuate 20 years of policy failure any longer.

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- Dr Gordana (Dana) Dermody MACN
- Ms Tracey Duke MACN
- Dr Drew Dwyer FACN
- Mrs Christine Farrell MACN
- Adjunct Associate Professor Heather Gibb FACN
- Ms Marise Goddard-Jones MACN
- Associate Professor Sarah Yeun-Sim Jeong MACN
- Dr Rodney Jilek MACN
- Dr Bridget Laging MACN
- Dr Janet Lawrence FACN
- Mrs Jill Linklater FACN
- Professor Elizabeth Manias DLF
- Ms Jan McGregor MACN
- Ms Sue McKechnie FACN
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