

Nurses, Immunisation and Health

Approved 28 October 2019

Review November 2021

KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is committed to advancing nurse leadership to enhance health care. ACN considers that the role nurses play in delivering vaccinations and advocating for immunisation programs is pivotal to the ongoing health of all Australians from birth to old age. ACN has developed this Position Statement and an accompanying Discussion Paper to highlight the relevant issues and to advocate for the significant contribution nurses make to immunisation programs as an important preventative health measure for the Australian community <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/discussion-paper-nurses-immunisation-and-health.pdf>. Neither the Discussion Paper nor the Position Statement include clinical advice or specific detail about vaccinations or immunisation programs: for those details refer to *The Australian Immunisation Handbook* (Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, 2018) and the *National Immunisation Program (NIP) Schedule* (2019).

BACKGROUND

The regulatory framework and ACN expectations

The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) regulates nursing practice and sets out standards for the nursing profession (*Professional Standards: Professional Codes and Guidelines*, 2018). Two key standards are the *ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses* (2012) and the *Code of Conduct for Nurses* (2018). These codes clearly establish the expectation that all nurses have an obligation to protect the public with the example of vaccination highlighted as one proven means of achieving that aim. The *Code of Conduct for Nurses* explicitly states that all nurses are expected to play a significant role in immunisation advocacy and delivery (2018, Section 7.2.c).

In response to the increased dissemination of misinformation and anti-vaccination sentiments across social media about immunisation (World Health Organization, 2018a; Evrony & Caplan, 2017), the NMBA has released *Position Statement: Nurses, midwives and vaccination* (2016) which makes it very clear that nurses are required to practise in accordance with the standards promulgated by NMBA and in accordance with the available evidence (NMBA, 2016). Consequently, to actively campaign against vaccination and immunisation is to be in breach of a nurse's licence to practice, a licence granted by the NMBA. It is therefore crucial that nurses are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to fulfil their legislative and professional requirements in relation to immunisation advocacy and when delivering vaccines within their scope of practice.

Nurses constitute the majority of the health care workforce (Australian Health Practitioners Regulatory Agency, 2018) but data are not currently available on how many of those nurses are actively engaged in the delivery of vaccines. Nevertheless, given the NMBA requirements, ACN expects that all nurses, when interacting with patients, clients, residents and the community in general, will do so in accordance with NMBA's Position Statement, codes of ethics and of conduct and *The Australian Immunisation Handbook* (2018).

Issues

It is undeniable that vaccination and immunisation programs have contributed markedly to the improved health and well-being of millions around the world, for example, the eradication of smallpox and the near eradication of polio (*Australian Immunisation Handbook*, 2018; Royal Society for Public Health, 2018). Since its introduction in the 1930s Australia has developed a world recognised immunisation program which is available across the nation and across the life span (*National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019-2024*, 2018, 9).

1 Immunisation and vaccination as preventative health measures

Australia's immunisation programs act as powerful preventative health measures. For example, on one estimate they have saved "78,000 lives" and importantly, have reduced "the disease disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations" (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2017, 149).

Australia's immunisation program is a safe and cost-effective preventative health strategy for individuals as well as the community as a whole, especially through herd immunity which protects individuals who cannot be vaccinated, for example, those who are immunocompromised (*National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019-2024*, 2018, 9-12; *Community (herd) immunity*, 2017). In addition to well recognised childhood immunisation programs, vaccines in adulthood promote healthy ageing, reduce the burden of disease for those with chronic co-morbidities and are particularly significant for adults 65 years of age or over (50 years or over for Indigenous adults) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018, 156, 371-376; *National Immunisation Program Schedule*, 2019).

2 Nurses as nurse immunisers

The *National Immunisation Education Framework for Health Professionals* (2018) is the benchmark for immunisation education providers in Australia: ACN is one of the providers (Australian College of Nursing, 2019). Registered nurses who have undertaken programs of education under this framework (nurse immunisers) are legally qualified to administer vaccines provided they do so within the legislative and regulatory framework applicable to their state or territory jurisdiction. In the absence of published research data, anecdotal evidence suggests that around 60% of nurses in primary health care deliver vaccines on a daily basis (Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association, 2019). Paradoxically, however, further anecdotal evidence suggests that there are insufficient nurse immunisers to deliver vaccines at times of annual surge such as influenza vaccines in winter. In some cases these vaccines are required and/or recommended in workplaces (*Immunisation for work*, 2019; ACSQHC, 2017) and mandated in others such as residential aged care (*Mandatory influenza (flu) vaccination program for residential aged care providers*, 2019).

3 Increasing adult vaccination rates: the role of the nurse

Australia's *National Immunisation Program Schedule* (2019) has achieved immunisation coverage rates of 95% among 5-year-old children but the limited data available on adult vaccination suggest that uptake in this population group is sub-optimal (*National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019-2024*, 2018: 18, 29-32). The reasons for low adult vaccination rates have been related to access, cost and misinformation about immunisation, some of which is spread via social media (Brewer et al., 2017; Jarrett et al., 2015; World Health Organization, 2014; Seale et al., 2009). Reluctance to vaccinate, despite its availability, is known as "vaccine hesitancy" (World Health Organization, 2018a). The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises that "health workers remain the most trusted advisors and influencers of vaccination decisions" (WHO, 2018b, 1). Evidence from the published literature repeatedly highlights that provider recommendations and engagement strongly influence willingness to vaccinate (Menzies et al., 2017). Since nurses constitute the majority of the health care workforce, their recommendations are important to enhancing vaccine uptake.

There is some published evidence demonstrating that education and communication programs targeted to vaccine hesitancy and low adult vaccine uptake rates, require a multi-component approach rather than addressing the provision of knowledge at an individual level. Strategies need to be context driven, evidence based and focused on the positive benefits of immunisation, not the possible (usually rare) negative outcomes (Barratt et al., 2019; *National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019-2024*, 2018, 39-41; Brewer et al., 2017; Jarrett et al., 2015; Seale et al., 2009).

Nurses have been shown to be the most trusted and ethical health care professional group in Australia for at least 23 years (Roy Morgan Research Institute, 2017). Given the above evidence, and the fact that nurses comprise the majority of the health care workforce, nurses are well placed to make a valuable contribution to vaccine delivery and immunisation programs as a significant preventative health measure of considerable benefit to the Australian community, especially for adults.

ACN POSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the pre-eminent Australian professional nursing organisation, and consistent with the NMBA legislative requirements, ACN:

- Calls on all governments, as a matter of urgency, to allocate dedicated funding for targeted research which will
 - identify and better understand the reasons for gaps in vaccination uptake and coverage, and promote uptake, especially for adults and disadvantaged population groups;
 - inform innovative nurse led educational and communication strategies (including social media campaigns), aimed at promoting vaccination in adults and dispelling the many myths and misconceptions surrounding vaccination in the wider community;
 - determine how a nuanced and whole of life approach to immunisation programs contributes to healthy ageing and an improved quality of life for specific population groups of adults in the community, for example, older adults and those with chronic co-morbidities; and
 - develop and promote nurses as 'immunisation champions' who will advocate for the health benefits of adult vaccination and routinely assess and address the specific vaccination needs of (older) adults.
- Urges all levels of government to ensure the active involvement of nurses in the implementation of the key actions for all eight strategies in the *National Immunisation Strategy for Australia 2019-2024* (2018).

- Urges the Commonwealth government to make necessary legislative changes to enable nurse immunisers to access the Australian Immunisation Register in order to input, access, analyse and link data, and so improve immunisation program monitoring and outcomes.
- Strongly recommends a review of all immunisation relevant legislation so that an endorsed nurse immuniser from one jurisdiction does not have to apply for recognition of prior learning in a second jurisdiction (as currently applies) before being endorsed as a nurse immuniser.
- Calls on all nurses whether in their roles as clinicians, researchers, managers, leaders or policy makers, to fulfil their obligations under the terms of their licence to practice, as granted by the NMBA, so that they can confidently and accurately engage in professional activities that advocate for the positive benefits of vaccination programs.
- Urges industry providers to increase the number of nurses completing nurse immuniser courses to improve the coverage rates for adult vaccinations.
- Calls on all governments and industry to actively involve nurses in the development and delivery of community education programs designed to reduce vaccine hesitancy and dispel myths and misunderstandings about vaccination, and so facilitate higher vaccination uptake by adults.

Abbreviations

ACN	Australian College of Nursing
ACSQHC	Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care
NMBA	Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia

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Acknowledgements

The Position Statement and the associated Discussion Paper were developed by the Australian College of Nursing (ACN) with input from an expert Working Group. Members of the Working Group are Ms Deidre Brogan MACN, Ms Madeline Hall MACN, Ms Alyson Martin MACN, Ms Ros Rolleston MACN, and Ms Gemma Saravanos MACN. Lead author: Dr Lexie Anne Brans, FACN.

ACN is also grateful to Dr Holly Seale, University of New South Wales, for her expert advice in the form of a peer review of drafts of both the Position Statement and the Discussion Paper and the provision of published resources.

Professor Julie Leask, University of Sydney, generously provided advice and published resources in the early stages of the development of the Discussion Paper.

ACN would like to acknowledge Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward FACN (CEO, Australian College of Nursing) who also contributed to this Position Statement.

CITATION:

Australian College of Nursing (ACN). 2019, 'Nurses, Immunisation and Health – Position Statement', ACN, Canberra.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-925913-15-6

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-925913-23-1

Printed February 2020

