

The role of nurses in promoting healthy ageing

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KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) believes all nurses (Registered and Enrolled) have a critical role in promoting and supporting healthy ageing for all older Australians. Nurses have the essential expertise in critical thinking, clinical assessment, clinical decision-making, care coordination and clinical and managerial leadership necessary to support older Australians to age well. In Australia, nurses support older Australians across a range of settings including community, general practice, residential care, acute care and correctional facilities. Nurses in these settings take the lead in supervising and mentoring unlicensed staff. In many of these settings, the focus of health care is curative rather than preventative or considerate of health promotion, limiting the opportunity for reablement and rehabilitation. More broadly, supporting older Australians to promote health includes understanding the role of families and accessing appropriate health and social care support.

The Australian College of Nursing believes that:

- Older Australians must be supported to live in the setting of their choice and receive services that promote independence, meet their preferences and facilitate social connection.
- Nurses should identify opportunities to support healthy ageing initiatives that include reablement programmes, in all settings.
- Nurses must be competent to recognise and respond to deterioration, cognitive and functional decline in older Australians and be skilled and educated to provide appropriate care.
- Nursing curriculums should be age-inclusive and support clinical placements in aged care settings.
- Nurse-led models of care should be developed, implemented and evaluated to support healthy ageing and inform policy for older Australians.
- Career development pathways should be developed and implemented to support nurses to specialise in healthy ageing for older Australians.
- Nurses should be skilled and educated to provide quality palliative and end of life care for older Australians.

- Nurses play a significant role in promoting older Australians' functional, physical, social engagement and mental wellness and providing high quality safe care.
- Nurses should be educated and professionally prepared to identify and challenge stereotypes that promote ageist attitudes.
- Nurses play a key role in the identification and mandatory reporting of elder abuse.
- Older Australians with diverse characteristics and life experiences have equitable access to information and services to meet their individual needs.

BACKGROUND

An ageing Australia

Australia, like many developed countries, has an ageing population. In 2017, approximately 3.8 million people (15% of Australia's total population) were aged 65 and over. This is expected to increase to 8.8 million older people in Australia (22% of the population) by 2057¹. Older Australians display the same diversity as the broader population with over 36% born overseas and one in three from a non-English speaking country. There are over 100,000 people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and these individuals have health care and support needs that are different from other older Australians. More than one in ten have diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex characteristics and the proportion of people living with HIV over the age of 55 is expected to be 44.3% by 2020. More than one in ten older Australians live in regional, rural and remote communities and experience significant financial or social disadvantage. This diversity may impact on some older Australians' capacity to access and engage with services².

According to the 2014–15 National Health Survey (NHS), nearly three-quarters (73%) of older Australians (aged 65 and over) reported they had good, very good or excellent health³. However, many older Australians live with chronic conditions, in particular cardiovascular, neurological, musculoskeletal conditions, respiratory conditions or diabetes³ and one in twelve older Australians have four or more chronic diseases². In 2016, 66% of deaths registered in Australia were among people aged 75 or over with the leading cause of death for all older Australians being coronary heart disease, followed by dementia and Alzheimer's disease, cerebrovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung cancer⁴.

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While many older Australians live independently without support, the Australian aged care system provides a comprehensive range of services if required. The Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) provides a basic level of care at home, and supported more than 720,000 people aged 65 and over in 2016–17⁵. The Home Care Packages Programme assists frail older people to remain at home for longer. At 30 June 2017, there were around 71,400 Home Care recipients; the average age at admission into Home Care was 80.2 years. The highest level of care available to older Australians is residential aged care, which offers accommodation as well as health care for people no longer able to live at home⁶. Like all Australians, those aged 65 and older have access to general practitioners and acute hospital services through Medicare. In 2016–17 approximately one-fifth of emergency department (ED) presentations were people aged 65 and older and these presentations increased for those aged 85 and over⁵.

Healthy Ageing

The goal of most Australians is to live well and maintain independence as they age. Regardless of whether older people are at home, receiving services in primary or acute care or living in residential aged care, nurses are a primary provider of care for older Australians. As such, nurses must understand the ageing process and the needs of older Australians to facilitate healthy ageing and respect the person's dignity and personhood. They need to understand the diversity of older people and their preferences concerning health promotion and care services.

The World Health Organization defined healthy ageing as 'the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age,' where 'functional ability comprises the health-related attributes that enable people to be and to do what they have reason to value' including a person's ability to:

- meet their basic needs
- be mobile
- build and maintain relationships
- contribute to society.

Functional ability is central to this definition. Functional ability refers to the intrinsic capacity of the individual, relevant environmental characteristics and how they interact⁷.

Nurses are well placed to support healthy ageing. The following section identifies structures that can support this role.

The role of the nurse to support healthy ageing

The code of conduct for nurses (the code) sets out the legal requirements, professional behaviour and conduct expectations for nurses in all Australian practice settings⁸. The principles of the code apply to any work where a nurse uses nursing skills and knowledge, whether paid or unpaid, clinical or non-clinical. The code includes seven principles of conduct, grouped into domains, each with an explanatory value statement.

Full details of these are available through the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) website at <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Statements/Professional-standards.aspx>.

Those that are specifically relevant to promoting healthy ageing of older Australians include:

- **Person-centred practice** – Nurses provide safe, person-centred and evidence-based practice for the health and wellbeing of people and, in partnership with the person, promote shared decision-making and care delivery between the person, nominated partners, family, friends and health professionals.
- **Cultural practice and respectful relationships** – Nurses engage with people as individuals in a culturally safe and respectful way, foster open and honest professional relationships, and adhere to their obligations about privacy and confidentiality.
- **Health and wellbeing** – Nurses promote health and wellbeing for people and their families, colleagues, the broader community and themselves in a way that addresses health inequality.

In addition to the code, which is not specific to the care of older people, national and international competencies to support healthy ageing have been developed⁹⁻¹¹. These include:

- Promoting and demonstrating a positive view of ageing including respect and empathy for the older person¹⁰.
- Effective communication including verbal and documentation skills and assessing the barriers older adults encounter receiving, understanding and giving information⁹⁻¹¹.
- Reflective practice skills¹⁰.
- Knowledge of the aged care system and available aged care services including, facilitating transitions in care, including acute, community-based, and long-term care for older adults and their families⁹⁻¹¹.
- Maximising health outcomes through knowledge of the ageing process, age related conditions and illnesses including complex as well as chronic conditions, dementia, preventative care^{9, 10}.
- Recognition of the complex interaction of acute and chronic co-morbid physical and mental conditions and associated treatments common to older adults¹¹.
- Skills to provide optimal pain management and palliative care⁹.
- Enabling older Australians' access to technology⁹.
- Incorporate professional attitudes, values, and expectations about physical and mental aging in the provision of person-centred care for older adults and their families¹¹.
- Commitment to comprehensive assessment of the person and individualised identification of client need including the use of valid and reliable assessment tools to guide nursing practice^{10, 11}.



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- Assess the living environment and community resources as they relate to meeting the functional, physical, cognitive, psychological, and social needs of older adults ¹¹.
- Commitment to client empowerment and choices within legal and ethical frameworks ^{9,10}.
- Implement strategies and use online guidelines to prevent and/or identify and manage geriatric syndromes ¹¹.
- Recognise and respect the variations of care, the increased complexity, and the increased use of healthcare resources in caring for older adults ^{10, 11}.
- Provide person-centred care with consideration for mental and physical health and well-being of informal and formal caregivers of older adults ^{9,11}.
- Implement and monitor strategies to prevent risk and promote quality and safety (e.g. falls, medication management, pressure ulcers) in the nursing care of older adults with physical and cognitive needs ¹¹.
- Utilise resources/programmes to promote functional, physical, spiritual and mental wellness in older adults ^{9, 11}.

SUMMARY

Nurses have important and diverse roles in our society. The nurse role encompasses autonomous and collaborative care of all individuals, health promotion, preventing illness, delivering care, promoting safe environments, advocacy, research, participating in shaping health policy, patient and health systems management and education ¹².

Healthy ageing begins in childhood, health promotion strategies can delay or minimise the onset and severity of diseases and age-related decline, save health costs and reduce the long-term support needs of older people. Nurses should be educated and supported to deliver health promotion and prevention programmes to support healthy ageing in all health care, aged care and community settings.

Programmes must ensure equitable access and embrace the diverse characteristics, life experiences and accumulated wisdom of older Australians. These programmes might include nutrition, active living, smoking cessation, preventing falls, integrated chronic disease management (comprehensive care) and proactive palliative and end of life care planning. To achieve these aims nurses require education to develop and maintain knowledge and competence to support healthy ageing for older Australians.

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