

Surge workforces

Reviewed September 2021

Next review September 2023

KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) advocates for full optimisation and effective distribution of the nursing workforce in times of crisis, from students and graduate nurses to nurse practitioners and retired nurses. Tasks that do not require the expertise of a nurse should immediately be delegated to others in the workforce, freeing nurses to focus on providing safe and high-quality clinical care.

KEY ISSUES

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across almost all Australian states and territories, the health workforce is under increasing pressure to test, vaccinate and care for the community as quickly and effectively as possible¹. In response, several State and Territory governments have proposed emergency surge workforce authorisations. These allow nursing, midwifery, medical and pharmacy students, other allied health professionals and laboratory technicians to undertake key areas of the COVID-19 response, such as preparation or administration of vaccinations.

While ACN supports any government measures to ease pressure on our health systems to ensure nurses are freed up to provide clinical care, there is concern that unregulated health care workers may be used to replace rather than complement the role of nurses². This is particularly troubling as key areas of the nursing workforce have been ignored.

While many nurses are overworked and at risk of burnout, countless ACN members – particularly in cosmetic nursing and elective surgery – have been furloughed or are working fewer hours than they were before the pandemic. Nurse practitioners have been largely left out of the COVID-19 vaccination rollout, despite serving their local communities as the sole provider in many rural and remote areas³.

Retired nurses and those who have taken a break from the profession have been overlooked in efforts to address nursing shortages, despite having years of clinical experience

and expertise and remaining on the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA)'s sub-register⁴.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- That federal, state and territory governments work with the Australian College of Nursing to consider alternative models of care and service delivery as well as skill and skills mix⁵ of an appropriately governed nursing workforce, including supervision of undergraduate students.
- That state and territory governments actively recruit and optimise all nurses in surge workforces: including undergraduate nursing students, graduates yet to secure a transition to practice placement, enrolled nurses, registered nurses, nurse practitioners and nurses who have left the profession.
- Tasks that do not require nursing expertise should be immediately reallocated.
- That only regulated health professionals should be authorised to administer COVID-19 vaccinations and undertake testing, including students provided appropriate supervision and governance frameworks to support safe administration.

CITATION: Australian College of Nursing (ACN). 2021, 'Surge workforces – Position Statement', ACN, Canberra. ©ACN 2021

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1 Doherty L 2021. Incredibly stressed: how the pandemic is affecting the health workforce and service delivery. Croakey. <https://www.croakey.org/incredibly-stressed-how-the-pandemic-is-affecting-the-health-workforce-and-service-delivery/>

2 Australian College of Nursing 2020. White paper: Unregulated health care workers. <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/position-statement-unregulated-health-care-workers.pdf>

3 ANMF, CRANaplus, ACNP, APNA, CATSINaM, ACORN 2021. Joint media release: Calls for Nurse Practitioners to be utilised in COVID vaccination roll-out. <https://crana.org.au/our-community/media-releases/2021/calls-for-nurse-practitioners-to-be-utilised-in-covid-vaccination-roll-out>

4 NMBA and AHPRA 2021. Vaccine rollout support from retired practitioners. <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/News/2021-04-08-vaccine-rollout-support-from-retired-practitioners.aspx>

5 International Council of Nurses 2009. Position statement: Evidence-based safe nurse staffing. <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ICN-PS-Evidence-based-safe-nurse-staffing.pdf>