Mental Health Nurses Election Statement

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses has identified four priority areas for action by governments to ensure all Australians can access mental health services provided by skilled mental health nurses.

Almost half the Australian population (45.5%) will experience a mental health issue at some point in the lifetime, with one in five Australians affected by mental health issues each year. Mental health issues create significant social, emotional and economic costs for individuals, their families and loved ones. They also have a significant economic cost as mental health disorders account for 13% of the overall burden of disease in Australia.¹

Mental Health Nurses form the core professional group that provides mental health services across the service, age and illness spectrum. But mental health nurses are in short supply due to a long term failure to invest in this critical component of the mental health workforce. Unless immediate action is taken, mental health agencies in all sectors will struggle to provide mental health services to Australians in the future.

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses has identified four priority areas for investment in the mental health nursing workforce.

Priority Area 1: Strong foundation in mental health for all nurses

There is a clear link between mental and physical health.² As the World Health Organisation (WHO) puts it, ‘there is no health without mental health’.³ Mental health issues are an integral part of the outcome for persons who, for example have had a heart attack, diabetes or cancer. Conversely, people with mental illness are more likely to have physical illnesses.⁴

All nurses need to have a strong foundation in mental health whether they work in an emergency department or a cancer clinic, in maternity services, aged care facilities or primary practice. Mental health needs to be recognised as an integral component of practice for all nurses wherever they work. Nurses need training, as well as suitable supervision and support, to be able recognise people who are at risk of, or who are displaying signs of, common mental health issues and they need to develop the skills to provide appropriate interventions and access mental health treatment where required.

An extensive examination of the university education system for nurses has revealed that some students studying nursing receive as little as 28 hours in the classroom learning about mental illness over their three year degree.⁵ Nursing students can graduate from university and start work in a

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⁴ Physical health of people with severe mental illness, Wally Barr, Pamela van de Hoef, Ian Colls, Roman Scheurer, John McGrath, and Harvey Whiteford BMJ 2001 323: 231.
⁵ Mental Health Nurse Education Taskforce, Final Report, Mental Health in Pre-registration Nursing Courses, March 2008.
mental health service with less experience than you need to learn to drive a car. This is woefully inadequate preparation for nurses to work in any part of the health care system.

An additional area highlighted by the study was the issue of clinical placements in mental health. High quality clinical placements for undergraduate students are essential. A positive clinical experience is a key influencing factor in a nurse’s decision to undertake a career in any specialty area. Some universities do not even mandate a mental health clinical placement, because of lack of placement options.

Action required:
The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses is calling on the major political parties to:

- Commit to implementing an appropriate and nationally consistent level of mental health education in undergraduate degrees via the new Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia accreditation processes. This should be based on the “Mental Health in Pre-Registration Nursing Courses” Final Report. This commitment must be supported by appropriate funding to enable universities to meet this requirement;
- Support the provision of high quality clinical placements for undergraduate students in mental health settings. This requires the availability of suitably trained staff to support students during their clinical placement. This commitment must be supported by appropriate funding to enable universities and health services to meet this requirement;
- Support continuing professional development for all nurses to develop and maintain their foundation skills in mental health nursing. This support should include funding to develop training appropriate for nurses across diverse health care settings, as well as scholarships and other financial support to enable nurses to access the training.

Priority Area 2: Specialist Mental Health Nursing education
Australia needs a highly qualified mental health workforce to ensure that the 3.2million people with mental health issues get safe and effective care.

A Mental Health Nurse is a registered nurse who holds a recognised specialist qualification in mental health. Taking a holistic approach, guided by evidence, the mental health nurse works in collaboration with people who have mental health issues, their family and community, towards recovery, as defined by the individual.

Less than a quarter of the nurses working in mental health have additional qualifications in mental health. Nurses working in mental health need opportunities and support to undertake specialist mental health nursing education. This education should occur within a nationally consistent and evidence based framework to ensure the safety and quality of care consumers receive. With post graduate mental health nursing qualifications to match their extensive experience, mental health nurses can provide high quality specialist care to people with mental health issues.

Action required
The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses is calling on the major political parties to:

- Support the development of a nationally consistent Mental Health Nursing education framework;
- Increase availability and access to specialist mental health continuing professional development activities appropriate to nurses working in mental health;
- Invest in the education of specialist Mental Health Nurses by doubling the available federally funded scholarships.

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6 Mental health Workforce Advisory Committee, Mental Health Workforce: Supply of Mental Health Nurses, September 2008.
Priority Area 3: Increased supply of Mental Health Nurses
The need for mental health services is growing but mental health nurses are in short supply in Australia. There are around 14,000 nurses working in mental health across Australia and this number has remained static over the last 10 years. Those 14,000 nurses are working longer hours to keep up with demand for services. With one in five nurses working in mental health aged at 55 years or over, there is a workforce crisis looming for mental health services across the country.

Marketing of mental health nursing is needed to address the workforce shortage. Raising awareness within the mental health sector and the nursing community about the opportunities and career benefits available to mental health nurses is critical. Misperceptions, myths and fears held by other nurses, health professionals and the community impact on recruitment of mental health nurses.

Action required:
The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses is calling on the major political parties to:
- Support initiatives to raise awareness of the role of Mental Health Nurses among consumers, carers, health professionals, service planners and policy makers;
- Identify Mental Health Nursing career pathways that provide opportunities for advanced practice, competitive remuneration and professional development;
- Recognise and address the impact of stigma on the mental health workforce.

Priority Area 4: Specialist Mental Health Nursing care for all Australians with mental health issues
Australians with mental health issues have a right to access specialist mental health nursing care. Mental health nurses have the specialist mental health knowledge, skills and qualifications to provide high quality care to people with mental health issues across the age and illness spectrum. They practice within a recovery framework, employing contemporary mental health nursing standards, and use a respectful, compassionate, ethical and culturally sensitive approach.

Mental health nursing is a long established area of specialisation within nursing but over the last 10 to 20 years, there has been a consistent failure to invest in this area. In some mental health services, fewer than 20 percent of nurses are specialist mental health nurses. This situation raises questions about the commitment of those services to providing quality nursing care. It also puts pressure on those who are specialist mental health nurses, impacting on their ability to provide holistic care, to undertake professional development and ultimately, their retention in the mental health workforce.

Action required:
The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses is calling on the major political parties to:
- Set a minimum target of 1 in 3 nurses working mental health to be a specialist mental health nurses with appropriate support to enable mental health services to work toward this target;
- Support the continuing development of mental health nursing as a nursing specialty.

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7 Mental health Workforce Advisory Committee, Mental Health Workforce: Supply of Mental Health Nurses, September 2008.
8 Mental health Workforce Advisory Committee, Mental Health Workforce: Supply of Mental Health Nurses, September 2008.