

Unregulated Health Care Workers (UHCW)

POSITION STATEMENT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unregulated health care workers (UHCW) are increasingly supporting the health and wellbeing of patients in primary health care. UHCWs are any people who are not registered to practice under the National Scheme (NMBA, 2020). A variety of different primary health care settings including aged and home care, general practice, community and correctional health employ such workers who assist in a range of personal care services under the direction and supervision of registered nurses.

However, the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the roles and responsibilities of the UHCW in such settings raise concerns due to the implications for quality and safety within primary health care. This workforce is not one which is formally regulated and neither does it have basic minimum requirements such as a mandated minimum education; scope of practice; job title; variations in state/ territory enforcement of code of conduct and skill mix. As a result, UHCWs may be asked or required to work beyond their scope of practice in their primary health care settings- pushing the UHCW beyond their abilities.

The Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA) believes that the Federal Government need to invest in strengthening the UHCW role in the primary health care system and recommends:

1. A nationally- mandated minimum level of education and training for UHCWs which underpins the specific roles, responsibilities and scope of practice for each PHC setting; with mandatory training provided where required i.e. infection prevention.
2. A defined title for UHCWs in each PHC setting to reduce inconsistency and ambiguity around the role.
3. Ongoing professional development for UHCWs to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of skills needed for each PHC setting.
4. An appropriate skill- mix for all PHC settings which considers staff requirements in relation to patient needs.
5. A clearly defined code of conduct for UHCWs which outlines the tasks they can and cannot do and,
6. Formal regulation of the UHCWs through a relevant scheme.

Future policy must be based on developing processes to ensure oversight and management of UHCWs which will lead to a higher quality of safety and care for patients.

BACKGROUND

In Australia, there have been changes to the makeup of the nursing workforce over the years due to economic considerations, workforce shortages and diverse care needs. This has led to an increase of UHCWs and a decrease of registered and enrolled nurses in PHC settings (Jacob et. al, 2015).

The number of UHCWs employed in Australia was estimated at 92 000 in 2017 with expectations this workforce would grow to 105 900 by 2022 (Blay & Roche, 2019). The work undertaken by UHCWs has expanded from traditional housekeeping duties to include patient care, meeting hygiene needs, feeding and ensuring patients receive adequate nutrition and other technical tasks such as taking vital signs, basic wound care and in some cases administration of medications.

However, it still remains the responsibility of a registered nurse to determine what tasks a UHCW will perform (NMBA, 2020). More importantly, the registered nurse is responsible for the final outcome of the delegated activities. Due to the unregulated nature of the role, employment and quality of work standards differ based on state/ territory guidelines and/or particular employers of UHCWs (Jacob et.al, 2015). Nurses have raised concerns about having to regulate the varying levels of competency of the UHCWs they work with and who they manage, supervise and otherwise support in their PHC setting. Extensive evidence shows UHCWs have:

1. No mandatory minimum level of education and/ or training required to attain a job within primary health care as a UHCW.
2. Severe discrepancies in definition of roles, responsibilities, tasks and scope of practice.
3. Varying codes of conduct and enforcement levels dependent on the state and territory and provider and,
4. A lack of regulation as to the standard of care.

This has strong implications for the day-to-day activity of the primary health care nurse. Nurses are not only required to manage and supervise the diverse levels of knowledge, expertise and confidence of the UHCW in relation to patient specific care but also to simultaneously manage and maintain their own specific nursing duties.

RECOMMENDATIONS


Clear policy decisions around the role that UHCWs play within the primary health care system need to be made. Australia's healthcare system is growing and expanding exponentially as a result of a rising population and increases in acute and chronic health conditions. It is critical that the PHC system is staffed and equipped appropriately and adequately to encourage sustainability of the PHC workforce.

It is essential that workforce shortages, quality of care issues and economic constraints are addressed to ensure a PHC system which is accessible, safe, efficient, integrated and of quality. Likewise, this will support the Quadruple Aim Framework; so that Australia can work towards a stronger, more sustainable primary health care system in the future. APNA believes there needs to be a clear decision around the role that UHCWs play within the primary health care system and recommends:

1. A nationally- mandated minimum level of education and training for UHCWs which underpins the specific roles, responsibilities and scope of practice for each PHC setting; with mandatory training provided where required i.e. infection prevention.
2. A defined title for UHCWs in each PHC setting to reduce inconsistency and ambiguity around the role.
3. Ongoing professional development for UHCWs to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of skills needed for each PHC setting.
4. An appropriate skill- mix for all PHC settings which considers staff requirements in relation to patient needs.
5. A clearly defined code of conduct for UHCWs which outlines the tasks they can and cannot do and,
6. Formal regulation of the UHCWs through a relevant scheme.

UHCWs should be formally recognised for their role in care provision for Australians in the primary health care system. Strong regulation and training of the UHCW will improve their knowledge and understanding of their role within primary health care and lead to stronger professional job satisfaction. APNA believes that the UHCW's role should be to support other health professionals to work to the full breadth of their scope of practice.

APNA suggests that the scope of clinical support tasks needs to be clearly defined and limited to tasks that are adequately supported by appropriate training and not extend to work that falls within the responsibility of registered and enrolled nurses. Evidence suggests that when registered and enrolled nurses are removed or reduced in number from patient care through the dilution of the nursing skill mix there is a higher possibility



of patient conditions or changes in patient conditions being missed (Ayre et.al, 2007 in Jacob et.al, 2013).

Utilising UHCWs in the areas of administrative and some clinical responsibilities which they have been adequately trained and educated in will allow registered and enrolled nurses to fully use their clinical skills to work with patients and this has been suggested to lead to stronger patient health outcomes (Norful et.al, 2017). Therefore, UHCWs have the potential to enhance the work of registered and enrolled nurses which may lead to the decreased risk of adverse events and greater access to care (Jacob et.al, 2015).

Likewise, APNA also believes that patients, carers and their families should be informed about the scope of the UHCW's in team- based care. This would ensure that the individual receives the right type of care from the right health professional.

Overall, APNA believes that these recommendations would enhance professional standards for UHCWs. This would ultimately lead to a safer, more efficient and integrated Australian primary health care system.

REFERENCES

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4. Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia [NMBA], 2020, 'Decision-making framework for nursing and midwifery', retrieved from <https://www.nursingmidwiferyboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Statements/Frameworks.aspx>



Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA)

Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA) is the peak professional body for nurses working in primary health care. APNA champions the role of primary health care nurses; to advance professional recognition, ensure workforce sustainability, nurture leadership in health, and optimise the role of nurses in patient-centred care.

APNA is bold, vibrant and future-focused. We reflect the views of our membership and the broader profession by bringing together nurses from across Australia to represent, advocate, promote and celebrate the achievements of nurses in primary health care.

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