

# COMPLEX CARE TAKES A BACK SEAT



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## APNA Workforce Survey 2021

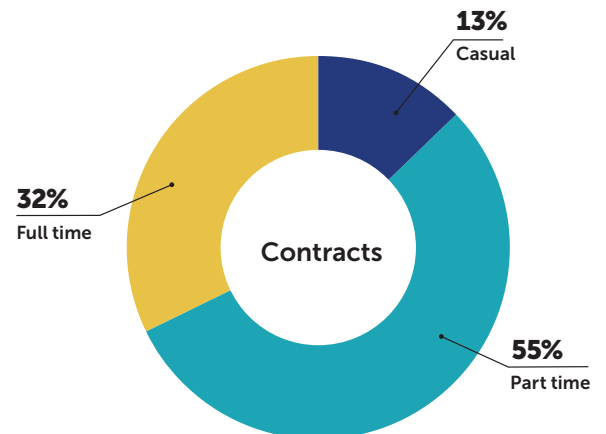
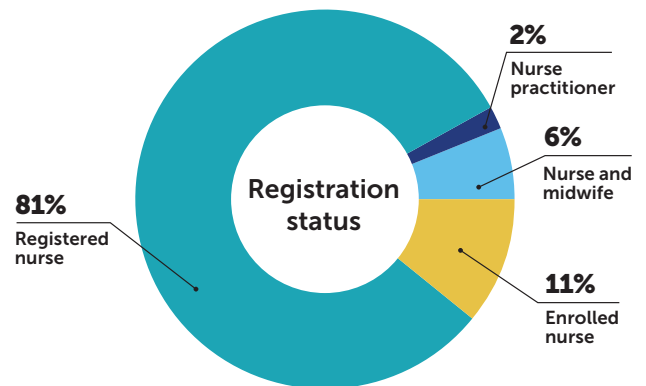
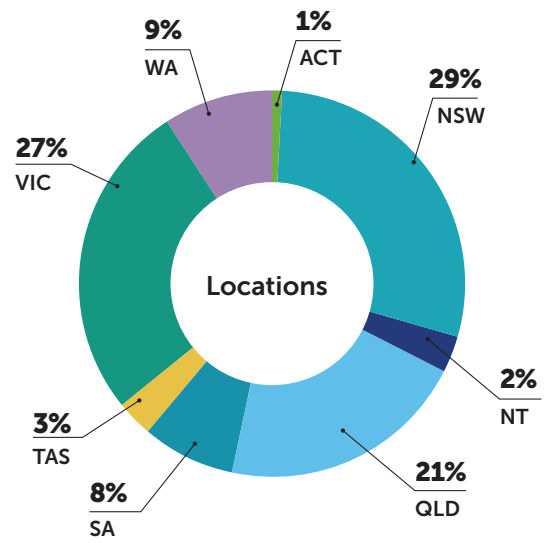
The COVID-19 pandemic has created urgent demands for the skills of PHC nurses. At the same time, low wages and excessive workloads are taking their toll. APNA understands these dilemmas and is working hard to ensure PHC nurses are valued, visible and respected.

### PHC nurses are experienced and skilled, but many are overworked and burnt out

PHC nurses have an average of 21 years' experience working as a nurse and an average of 11 years working in PHC settings. Unfortunately, many of these highly skilled and experienced nurses are experiencing burnout, with *many* (42%) saying they experience burnout *sometimes*, 27% saying they feel burnt out *very often* and 10% saying they *always* feel burnt out at work. There were also high rates of stress, exhaustion and excessive workloads, all of which contribute to disillusionment.

### More than a quarter of PHC nurses have plans to quit

Between 2018 to 2021, there has been a 10% increase in the number of nurses planning to leave PHC settings in the next 12 months. In 2021, 29% of nurses reported planning to leave PHC nursing next 2 to 5 years. In addition to low wages, the most popular reasons for the intention to leave PHC nursing are burnout, stress, lack of appreciation and unsupportive or poor management.



**1,062**  
Survey respondents



**32%** Survey respondents who have completed or are currently studying for a postgraduate qualification



**96%**  
Female



**72%**  
Work in general practice

**The changing scope of PHC nursing during the pandemic**

In 2021, 68% of survey respondents were providing adult immunisation on a daily basis. This was a significant increase from 52% in 2020, reflecting the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine (which started in February 2021), increased interest in receiving the influenza vaccine and the introduction of the COVID booster vaccines. This also reflects the significant role played by PHC nurses in the COVID pandemic. Currently there are more nurses holding Accredited Nurse Immuniser status than at any time in Australia’s history.

**Chronic disease prevention and management**

The reduction in survey respondents’ regular activities related to chronic disease prevention and management is another worrying trend. In 2019, 32% of respondents were carrying out cardiovascular education and management each month and this dropped to just 20% in 2021.

**Decrease in nurses providing cardiovascular education and management**

	Weekly	Monthly	Never
2019	29%	32%	26%
2020	28%	21%	28%
2021	24%	20%	30%

**Increase in nurses providing adult immunisation every day**

**DAILY**



**Increase in nurses providing childhood immunisation every day**

**DAILY**



“ Many registered nurses have left aged care to work in COVID testing and vaccination clinics, or acute care where the money is higher.

— Survey respondent

Similarly, PHC nurses' assessments of smoking, nutrition, alcohol and physical activity (SNAP) and their associated risk factors have also declined in the last few years. In 2020, 37% of survey respondents carried out SNAP assessments daily, but this dropped to 33% in 2021.

**Decrease in nurses providing SNAP assessments**

	Daily	Weekly	Never
2020	37%	25%	20%
2021	33%	23%	24%

These decreases in chronic disease prevention and management reflect the increased burden of COVID-19 infection control and the vaccine rollout. Chronic diseases have persistent effects that often have sustained negative impacts on Australians' quality of life and PHC nurses have a strong role to play in providing preventive and chronic disease management to patients, including education to increase the incidence and effectiveness of patients' self-care. We need to ensure the provision of the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

**PHC nurses are underpaid, despite their efforts to fight COVID**

Most PHC nurses have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, providing COVID vaccinations and advice for patients about the virus in addition to their regular duties.

However, for the most part, this extra effort has not been reflected in the pay they receive. The hourly rates for PHC nurses have remained stubbornly low and are failing to keep up with Australia's high cost of living. Poor pay is one of the most concerning issues impacting PHC nurses in their workplaces and is the number one reason provided by survey respondents who are planning to leave their current PHC setting.

APNA wholeheartedly agrees that PHC nurses should be paid more. As your professional association, we

have offered support to the ANMF for any activity that actively increases the pay of PHC nurses.

Our 'Negotiation Guide' provides useful advice on how to ask for a pay rise that reflects the knowledge, skills and valuable contribution that nurses make to the PHC workplace. Go to [www.apna.asn.au/nursing-tools/negotiation-guide-for-primary-health-care-nurses](http://www.apna.asn.au/nursing-tools/negotiation-guide-for-primary-health-care-nurses) to download the guide.

**We need to maximize nurses' skills beyond the pandemic**

Each year, we ask PHC nurses about whether their education, training and qualifications are utilised to the full extent at work. Our 2021 results show an increase in workforce utilisation, with 62% of respondents saying yes to this question compared to 53% in 2020. This shift in the utilisation of nurses is largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccine rollout, which have strained the health system at all levels.

APNA believes it shouldn't take the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic to maximize the use of nurses' skills. Change must be maintained and enhanced by policy reform that better enables nurses to work to their full scope of practice.

PHC nursing is an area I very much enjoy working in; however, the pandemic has changed the way care is prioritised and structured. Many patients are missing out on important visits through the year. Those with chronic conditions are being left behind.

— Survey respondent

**Average hourly rate of PHC nurses in 2021**

Registration status	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total avg. pay
Enrolled nurse	\$32.00	\$31.40	\$40.00	\$32.10	\$31.00	\$30.00	\$31.00	\$31.20	\$31.40
Registered nurse	\$41.70	\$40.30	\$45.50	\$39.50	\$39.50	\$39.30	\$41.20	\$38.20	\$40.30
Nurse practitioner	ID	\$49.70	ID	\$39.80	\$47.00	\$50.00	\$55.80	ID	\$50.60
Nurse and midwife	ID	\$44.50	\$45.00	\$44.90	\$43.50	\$38.00	\$48.10	\$48.30	\$45.50

ID = insufficient data.



### What's APNA doing about all this?

#### Ensuring PHC nurses are visible

APNA is working hard to increase the profile of PHC nurses and to showcase their scope of practice. Funding-model reform and cultural change are essential and APNA will continue to advocate for this. Our focus is on educating health professionals and the broader community about the varied, extensive skillsets that PHC nurses possess. As more people come to recognise the range of health-care services that PHC nurses can provide, including preventative health care and chronic disease management, nurses' job satisfaction and retention will increase, and more nurses will be attracted to the profession.

#### Ensuring PHC nurses are enabled to protect Australia's health

With an urgent need to manage increasing rates of chronic disease, an aging population, and a predicted shortfall of nurses in coming years, Australia needs more PHC nurses. APNA is lobbying at all levels to address four critical issues to

ensure Australia's health needs can be met for decades to come:

- Avoid a forecast shortfall of PHC nurses in coming years by establishing a national student nurse placement system. This would bring nursing students into primary health care settings to help release the pressure on PHC nurses as well as establish a pipeline of new, skilled, and experienced PHC nurses for the future.
- Reform General Practice incentive payments to encourage practices to employ and use PHC nurses to best meet patient needs.
- Rebrand PHC nursing to recruit new graduates and retain current members in the workforce.
- Train PHC nurses to help patients with chronic diseases to practice more self-care, while also improving the resilience of the PHC nursing cohort to increase workforce retention and reduce burnout due to overwork.

#### Bringing through the next generation of PHC nurses

APNA's Student Nurse Placement Program is providing placement opportunities in urban, rural and remote PHC settings nationwide for undergraduate and postgraduate nurses. Nursing students are matched with supervisors in PHC, including aged care, general practice, schools and community health settings. This experience in primary health care as part of their studies is aimed to encourage more student nurses to choose PHC nursing as a profession, boosting the PHC workforce and relieving some of the strain currently experienced by PHC nurses, as described by our survey respondents.

We thank all the PHC nurses who responded to the 2021 Workforce Survey. We need as many voices as possible in the call for greater recognition and respect for nurses in primary care.