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Postgraduate Education

The CDNM is the peak organisation that represents the Deans, Leaders and Heads of Higher Education courses for Nursing and Midwifery throughout Australia and New Zealand. The Council is the voice of higher education for nurses and midwives, and provides leadership on health policy, education standards and research as applied to nurses and midwives.

Background

The Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery supports the provision of postgraduate educational programs for nurses and midwives as a means of improving best practice health care quality, safety and productivity.

Summary

- Undergraduate nursing courses prepare nurses at an entry level of practice.
- Specialist knowledge and skills requires a deeper level of educational preparation.
- Accreditation is the benchmark for quality and consistency in educational programs
- Consumers, carers and clinicians should be actively involved in the design, delivery, implementation and evaluation of curricula.
- Learning content and processes require interactive, evidence-based teaching and learning rigour.

Position

Australia and New Zealand in common with other developed health systems face major challenges in sustaining a health workforce that will meet the rapidly rising demand for health care. Demand is being driven by an ageing population living longer with more complex problems, combined with rising costs of technology and treatment and increasing consumer

expectations. To meet these challenges, the educational preparation of registered nurses and midwives to practice in these highly complex systems becomes critical.

Appropriate nurse staffing and education level at baccalaureate level or higher has been found to mitigate against poor patient outcomes for surgical patients with serious mental illness. In this patient group, length of stay has been estimated at 15% shorter in hospitals. Importantly, research pertaining to hospital nurse staffing models and patient and staff outcomes, found that the addition of specialist nurses to care delivery team was likely to reduce patient hospital length of stay and improve outcomes. In these studies, specialist nurses reviewed had higher qualifications including master degrees and their role included coordination of care, reviewing progress, undertaking or prescribing interventions, and the provision of education to both patients and staff. In addition, hospitals with a higher percentage of RNs with baccalaureate or higher degrees had lower rates of congestive heart failure mortality, hospital-acquired decubitus ulcers, failure to rescue, and postoperative deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism, as well as shorter length of stay.

Overall, there is significant evidence to support the provision of a nursing workforce prepared at baccalaureate level or higher, as this is associated with fewer adverse patient outcomes.

Of concern are the future workforce projections that indicate an imminent nursing shortage. In this context there have been calls for increasing use of assistant in nursing roles and expanded scopes of practice for nurses and other health workers. This approach demonstrates a lack of understanding of the scope and depth of nursing practice in the 21st century and belies their role as leaders in the coordination and delivery of complex care needs of our communities.

The loss of Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for postgraduate studies in nursing (that do not lead to registration) has increased the financial burden on potential students. This change, coupled with the registering authority (NMBA) no longer registering specialty training, has seen a decline in postgraduate enrolments and a reduced number of students undertaking specialty programs.

More opportunities for nurses to undertake postgraduate education and specialist training are essential to reduce adverse events, support increased productivity with reduced length of stay and to adequately equip nurses to expand their scope of practice and lead innovations in our dynamic health care system.

In considering postgraduate education the following position is taken:

- The CDNM welcomes the specialist postgraduate accreditation process in developing and approving postgraduate nursing and midwifery courses.
- The CDNM recommends the allocation of Commonwealth Grant Scheme resources to postgraduate nursing and midwifery education.

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