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Practice Nurse numbers up – barriers to access remain

The Australian Practice Nurse workforce is increasing, but patients still face barriers to accessing their care, according to a new survey released today by the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

Practice Nurses – nurses who work in Australia’s 7000 general practices – have increased in numbers by more than 15 percent in the past two years from 7728 to 8914, continuing a trend in growing nurse numbers since the survey was first undertaken in 2003.

AGPN Chair, Dr Emil Djakic said Practice Nurses make a significant contribution to general practice.

“I have had a Practice Nurse in my surgery for almost 20 years, and I wouldn’t do without our nurses. They provide additional care to patients, are an accepted and valued member of the general practice team and our patients love them,” he said.

“Practice Nurses bring a more multidisciplinary focus to general practice – they ensure better patient care by using their skills to care for people while at the same time freeing up GPs to focus on the things they are best at doing.”

An Australian National University study completed last year showed Practice Nurses add value, care options and improve patient care in general practice.

However there are still barriers to General Practitioners (GPs) hiring a nurse, Dr Djakic said.

“The three key factors are: there is no help from government to afford a nurse in urban areas, problems with housing a nurse in existing practices – we don’t always have room – and cost effectiveness of employing a nurse.

“We know nurses add a great deal to patient care and to general practice. If we are to successfully extend this workforce and enable better integrated models of care which provide the right care and support for patients, there are two clear priorities for government. The first is to provide better incentives for general practices to employ nurses including in urban areas – the current Practice Incentive Payment for nurses only applies to rural and remote areas. The second is to invest in general practice infrastructure so that general practices can add on the extra space needed to accommodate nurses and indeed allied health professionals, as well as to help us train the workforce of the future,” Dr Djakic said.

AGPN has supported general practice to employ nurses through the Nurses in General Practice program it has run since 2003, which has made a significant impact on the increasing nurse numbers.

“AGPN has been banging the nursing drum for years, we want the government to listen. Our GP colleagues have joined us to call for infrastructure funding and both of these are part of our 2010-2011 Federal Budget submission.

“Patients deserve to access the right provider at the right time and at the right cost, Practice Nurses are a health provider with a broad base of skills including wound management, immunisation, health education and helping patients manage their chronic conditions. Their skills and expertise should be recognised by government and patients should be able to access their care,” Dr Djakic said.

Copies of the report and supplementary paper can be found at:

<http://generalpracticenursing.com.au/>

For media interviews contact Communications Manager Frith Rayner on: 0402 267 190

