



Palliative Care Australia
Matters of life and death

Submission to the National Nursing Workforce Strategy

Stage one consultation

December 2023

1. Overview

1.1. Palliative Care Australia

Palliative Care Australia (PCA) is the national peak body for palliative care, and represents those who work towards high quality palliative care for all Australians who need it. Working closely with consumers, our Member Organisations and the palliative care workforce, we aim to improve access to, and promote, palliative care.

1.2. National Nursing Workforce Strategy – key issues

The development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy provides an opportunity to acknowledge, support and strengthen the crucial contribution that the nursing profession makes to the delivery of palliative care in Australia. In the context of an anticipated doubling of demand for palliative care between 2020 and 2050,¹ nurses at all levels of qualification have a central role to play in the provision of palliative care – both specialist care for people with complex palliative care needs, and palliative care in aged, primary and community care settings.

PCA makes the following key points for consideration in the development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy:

- All nurses should receive training in palliative care, appropriate to their level of qualification.
- A nationally agreed specialist palliative nursing career pathway must be established.

To achieve these aims, PCA makes four recommendations for consideration in the development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy:

1. Support more training places to be made available for nurses to train as specialist palliative care nurses, to meet Australia's increasing need for specialist palliative care into the future.
2. Develop nationally consistent requirements for tertiary education in specialist palliative care nursing, particularly at post-graduate level.
3. Build on the core palliative care competencies developed by the Palliative Care Curriculum for You (PCC4U) project to ensure nationally consistent integration of these competencies into all undergraduate nursing training, appropriate to the level of the qualification.
4. Ensure undergraduate nursing degrees include opportunities for students to gain "on the job" training in palliative care, in the full range of settings where palliative care is provided – including primary and community care settings as well as hospitals. This will require financial support, ideally through a new system of student bursaries.

¹ KPMG 2020, *Investing to Save: The economics of increased investment in palliative care in Australia*. <https://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report>, p32, Fig 12.

2. Palliative Care

2.1. Aims and outcomes of palliative care

Palliative care is an approach to care that has the objective of improving the quality of life of patients, families and carers who are facing life-limiting illness. Palliative care can begin at the time of diagnosis and can be provided alongside active treatment. Evidence shows that when palliative care is provided earlier in an illness trajectory, patients and families have better health outcomes. Additionally, patients have fewer unnecessary hospital admissions and emergency department presentations. These outcomes reduce costs to the health system.²

2.2. Demand for palliative care in Australia

Australia is facing an increasing need for palliative care. With population growth and an ageing population, it is anticipated that demand for palliative care will double between 2020 and 2050.³ Current and predicted future workforce shortages will add to the challenge of providing adequate levels of palliative care over the coming decades.

PCA believes that the nursing workforce is critical to meeting this increase in demand, and improving access to palliative care for all Australians over the next decade.

2. The National Nursing Workforce Strategy

PCA welcomes the opportunity to provide advice to inform the development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy. PCA also welcomes the proposed co-ordinated approach from Commonwealth and State / Territory governments to developing this national strategy for the nursing workforce. Evidence-based planning in the design of future health care services, including palliative care, is essential given the current shortfall of nurses, the predicted retirement of many older nurses in the next decade, and the anticipated increase in demand for palliative care for Australia's growing and ageing population.

2.1. All nurses can provide palliative care across many settings

PCA believes that palliative care can and should be provided by a wide range of health professionals, including nurses at all levels. While some patients require specialist palliative care,⁴ many patients can benefit from palliative care provided settings outside specialist palliative care services.

² KPMG 2020, *Investing to Save: The economics of increased investment in palliative care in Australia*. [HTTPS://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report](https://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report), p35.

³ KPMG 2020, *Investing to Save: The economics of increased investment in palliative care in Australia*. [HTTPS://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report](https://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report), p32, Fig 12.

⁴ People will have different levels of need for palliative care. People with more complex needs should be able to access care provided by specialist palliative care services comprising multidisciplinary teams with specialised skills, competencies, experience and training in palliative care.

It is PCA's position that all nurses should receive training in palliative care. The nursing profession should view palliative care as core skill within nurses' scope of practice at different levels. PCA also advocates for the establishment of a nationally agreed specialist palliative care nurse career pathway in Australia.

For this to occur, governments need to invest in the nursing workforce. There is clear evidence to show that such investments will improve health outcomes, reduce acute care system costs and meet Australia's future demand for high quality palliative care.⁵

PCA's submission sets out the case for these investments below with recommendations included.

2.2. Specialist palliative care nursing training

In Australia, many think of palliative care being provided in a hospice, subacute palliative care ward in a hospital, and/or via outreach to patients at home. In these *specialist palliative care* settings, patients are often nearing end of life and have complex pain and symptom management issues. Nurses working in these settings usually have postgraduate training in palliative care. For the purposes of this submission PCA refers to these nurses as specialist palliative care nurses.

PCA calls for more training places to be made available for nurses to train as specialist palliative care nurses, to meet Australia's increasing need for specialist palliative care into the future.

PCA advocates that educational requirements for nurses who wish to train in specialist palliative care are nationally consistent. National standards for relevant post-graduate courses should be set, to ensure a nationally recognised qualification in specialist palliative care nursing in Australia.

Nurse Practitioners who already have postgraduate qualifications in palliative care should be supported to work at the top of their scope of practice and provide leadership and co-ordination of palliative care provision. This is especially important in regional and remote areas where medical expertise in palliative care cannot always be provided face to face. This approach is already in place in different regions across Australia.⁶ However, there is an opportunity to provide nurse-led models of care more consistently in rural and remote areas.

⁵ KPMG 2020, *Investing to Save: The economics of increased investment in palliative care in Australia*. [HTTPS://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report](https://palliativecare.org.au/KPMG-palliativecare-economic-report).

⁶ Queensland Health, 2022, Specialist Palliative Care Workforce Plan: Palliative and end-of-life care Strategy https://www.health.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/1183543/palliative-care-workforce-plan-publication.pdf

See also: O'Connor M, et al., 2018, Reflections on establishing a Nurse Practitioner role across acute hospital and home-based palliative care settings in Australia, *International Journal of Palliative Nursing*.

2.3. Training for nurses in aged, primary, and community care

All nurses working in aged, primary and community care settings are likely to encounter patients who would benefit from non-specialist palliative care. There is a recognised need to increase provision of non-complex palliative care in these settings. Increasing the focus on palliative care in undergraduate nursing education and training would help prepare nurses to provide this care, and thereby increase access to palliative care for all Australians. This would also re-enforce that palliative care is a required skill across the nursing workforce.

At present undergraduate palliative care training is offered in many nursing courses however the depth and quality of what is offered is varied, and are matters for individual universities and their nursing program conveners to determine.

PCA advocates that the core palliative care competencies developed by the Australian Government-funded PCC4U project be integrated into all undergraduate nursing training, appropriate to the level of qualification.

The Palliative Care Curriculum for Undergraduates (PCC4U) project is a national palliative care project coordinated by Queensland University of Technology, and funded by the Australian Government, which aims to improve the skill and confidence of the health workforce to work with people with palliative care needs. It does this by promoting integration of palliative care training within all health undergraduate, entry-to-practice and relevant post-graduate curricula. The project has developed four core palliative care modules for graduate nurses, and four core modules for post-graduate nursing qualifications. The development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy is an opportunity to identify options to promote and build on this work to ensure all undergraduate (and relevant post-graduate) nursing graduates have this common basis of knowledge and skill related to palliative care.

The **aged care sector** is currently increasing its employment of registered nurses. This presents an excellent opportunity to provide these nurses with palliative care upskilling (through existing programs supported by the Australian Government, such as the Program in the Experience of Palliative Care, or PEPA), in order to swiftly increase and improve the aged care sector's delivery of palliative care. An expanded and upskilled nurse workforce will provide the leadership needed to deliver high-quality palliative care in aged care settings.

Improving the quality and consistency of palliative care undergraduate education will also increase the delivery of palliative care in **primary and community care**. In addition, there are other actions that would increase and improve the delivery of palliative care in primary care. In particular, practice nurses working in general practice settings could be encouraged to work to the top of their scope of practice in providing the Medicare Benefits Schedule health check for people aged 75 or older. This check provides an excellent opportunity for older Australians to discuss quality of life issues, advance care planning and palliative care with a health professional. Early discussion of these matters contributes to better access to palliative care when required. In turn, access to palliative care in community-based palliative

care in the last year of life has been shown to improve health outcomes and quality of life, and is associated with reduced unplanned hospital admissions and emergency department visits⁷.

2.4. Undergraduate training – placements and apprenticeships

Undergraduate training should include palliative care placements not only in hospital settings, but across the range of settings where nursing is practiced including (but not limited to) residential aged care, primary care and disability and community care sectors.

PCA advocates nursing training courses at all undergraduate levels should include a palliative care approach and placements in different settings to learn “on the job” how palliative care is delivered.

PCA notes that these placements need to be supported financially to ensure uptake. The requirement that students in undergraduate courses for in-demand health professions (such as nursing) undertake unpaid work placements, often for months at a time, is clearly inequitable and a major disincentive for those considering such a career in nursing, social work and other allied health professions that form part of interdisciplinary palliative care teams.

PCA strongly supports a new system of bursaries to cover the living costs of undergraduates on work placements. Such an approach would have flow-on benefits across the nursing and the broader health workforce. PCA understands that Universities Australia has proposed several practical initiatives to improve equitable student access to nursing degree placements, including specifically through bursaries, both in submission to the National Nursing Workforce Strategy consultation and in consultation to inform the University Accord. PCA commends these recommendations, and encourages active consideration of these in the further development of the National Nursing Workforce Strategy.

⁷ Spilsbury K ,et al. 2017. The association of community-based palliative care with reduced emergency department visits in the past year of life varies by patient factors. *Annals of Emergency Medicine* Vol 69, issue 4, 416-425.