

AUSTRALIAN DIVISIONS OF GENERAL PRACTICE LTD
REPORT - PRACTICE NURSE SCOPING STUDY
OCTOBER 2001

Introduction

The Australian Divisions of General Practice Ltd (ADGP) recently undertook a scoping study to ascertain the extent to which General Practitioners (GPs) currently employ practice nurses, the type of duties performed by practice nurses, and the level and range of support functions provided by Divisions of General Practice to assist practices and practice nurses.

The questionnaire was developed in collaboration with the Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC), based on a pilot study previously conducted by DHAC to look at enablers and barriers to GPs employing practice nurses.

Results of the Scoping Study as at 24 October 2001

Response rate to questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to all 123 Divisions of General Practice. The ADGP contacted each Division to provide assistance in completing the questionnaire and to encourage all Divisions to participate in the study.

A total of 62 completed questionnaires were received from Divisions, representing a response rate of approximately 50 per cent. There were 34 responses from a total of 61 rural Divisions of General Practice (56%), and 28 responses from a total of 62 urban Divisions (44%).

Number of practices currently employing a nurse

It was estimated that there are 3,765 practices located within the 62 Divisions that responded to the survey, and that 1,053 of these practices currently employ a practice nurse. This is consistent with other studies that found approximately one-third of general practices employ a practice nurse. However, it is important to note that responses to this study indicated the number of practices in a Division employing a practice nurse ranged from 87.5 to 0%.

Of the 3,765 practices identified, 1,324 were in rural/remote areas and 2,421 in urban areas. Approximately 39% of the practices in rural/remote areas (513) and 22% of practices in urban areas (540) currently employ a practice nurse.

Divisional support to GPs and practice nurses

Of the 62 Divisions of General Practice that responded to the questionnaire, the majority (approximately 87 per cent) has a staff member(s) responsible for providing support to the practice nurses within their region.

Hours of work devoted to practice nurse support

The number of hours staff members devote to supporting practice nurses varies considerably across all Divisions, from a minimum of 1-2 hours to a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) position (two urban Divisions indicated they employ one FTE). A number of Divisions (11 rural and 14 urban Divisions) have more than one staff member providing program assistance to practice nurses, generally PTE positions involving 10-25 hours work per week.

Divisional activity in supporting practice nurses

Of the 62 Divisions that responded to the questionnaire, 90 per cent indicated that they are actively working with practice nurses employed by GP members, and provide the following support, in order of frequency:

Upskilling and refresher courses/programs	73.3%
Facilitating networks	65%
Clinical information/resources	63.3%
Providing advice on professional issues	23.3%
Managing contract nurses	6.7%
Employing practice nurse(s) on behalf of practices	5%

A number of Divisions (28 - 16 rural and 12 urban) indicated specific projects undertaken with practice nurses, primarily supporting programs relating to EPC items (19), immunisation (14), IM/IT (4), diabetes (4), infection control (3), accreditation (3) and asthma (2).

Other activities undertaken by Divisions to support practice nurses include developing needs assessments to identify future Divisional activity, coordination of training for practice nurses, active promotion of the role of the nurse in general practice, chronic disease management, health care assessments and upskilling in specific clinical procedures such as wound dressing and CPR.

Only six Divisions (10%) indicated that they do not actively work with practice nurses employed by GP members.

Areas of support

The primary areas of support provided by Divisions relate to:

- Immunisation
- EPC
- Diabetes education/clinics
- Accreditation, practice management and practice support
- Practice Nurse Network and practice nurse training
- IM/IT
- Population health promotion and education

Key roles undertaken by practice nurses

Responses indicate that the key roles for practice nurses are:

EPC Health Assessments	85%
Population health screening	83.3%
Management of recall/reminder systems/patient registers	75%
Coordination of patient services	60%
Linking with other local primary health care providers	56.7%
Electronic data/records management	53.3%
Nurse-led triage	50%
Chronic disease management	48.3%
Developing clinical policies and procedures	45%

A number of Divisions (22 - 9 rural and 13 urban) indicated that practice nurses undertake other tasks and roles including:

- Sterilisation and infection control
- General nursing and procedural activities
- Practice management
- EPC Care Plans
- Wound management
- Health promotion and education

Comment on practice nurse roles: The key roles for practice nurses identified indicate a clear connection between the delivery of population health services in general practice and the five Budget initiatives.

Dissemination of information relating to the practice nurse initiative

Divisions were asked what strategies they felt would be most useful in disseminating information about the practice nurse Budget initiative. A majority indicated that all the suggested mechanisms would be somewhat or very useful, recognising the merit in using a multi-pronged approach in order to meet the diverse needs of the nurses and the practice environments in which they work.

From responses received where a preference was indicated, mechanisms for the dissemination of information relating to the practice nurse initiative were ranked as follows:

1. Interpersonal contact/networks between staff
2. State-based workshops/forums
3. Website and case studies

Other suggestions were distribution of bulletins and newsletters, and conducting Division-based workshops and/or forums.

Comment on the dissemination of information: There is considerable merit in adopting a multi-pronged information dissemination strategy so as to meet the diverse needs of the nurses and the practice environments in which they work. A number of SBOs have independently identified the need to conduct State workshops to enable discussion and sharing of information between Divisions and nursing organisations.

Key enablers for further development of practice nursing in the Divisions of General Practice

Responses to the questionnaire indicated the importance of the following enablers to the further development of practice nursing, in order of priority (1 being the most important):

1. Recognition that nurses can ease the workload of the GP
2. Support from practice principals
3. An understanding in the practice of the capabilities and value of the practice nurse
4. Available space in the practice for the practice nurse
5. Professional support networks for practice nurses
6. Existing precedents in other practices

Other enablers identified (not in priority order) were:

- Appropriate remuneration, career pathways and support for professional development
- Quality, accessible, appropriate training and induction for practice nurses
- Recognition of unique skills nurses can bring to general practice
- Division support
- Practice nurse can potentially enhance the income of the practice
- Patient education

Key barriers for further development of practice nursing

Responses to the questionnaire indicated the importance of the following barriers to the further development of practice nursing, in order of priority (1 being the most important):

1. Cost of employing a practice nurse
2. Lack of GP recognition of the value of a practice nurse
3. Lack of physical space
4. Lack of available nurses
5. Burden of administration involved in employing a practice nurse
6. Lack of availability of appropriate supervision for enrolled nurses

Other barriers identified (not in priority order) were:

- Lack of appropriate remuneration/conditions of employment for practice nurses
- Lack of definition of the role of the practice nurse/misinformation on "nurse practitioners"
- Quality, accessible and appropriate training for practice nurses
- Inability to raise a fee for services provided by a practice nurse
- Workload issues for rural GPs
- Lack of incentives for professional development during worktime

Comment on enablers and barriers: There is a clear need to promote to GPs the role of practice nurses, and the efficiency gains that can be made in the practice by employing them.

Key strategies for Divisions to be successful in providing practice nurse support

There were a number of consistent strategies highlighted by Divisions as being of key importance to successfully supporting practice nurses through the Divisional Network, and thereby benefiting the GP and the community. The major strategies identified included the need to:

- Promote the range of expertise and the different models of practice nursing currently operating in the general practice environment.
- Involve practice nurses during the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of any new initiatives targeting the participation of nurses to deliver health outcomes in general practice.
- Involve practice nurses in the development and implementation of education and support programs delivered through Divisions.
- Support upskilling and refresher programs for practice nurses.
- Promote and support regular networking activities, including the distribution of newsletters, bulletins, and sponsoring workshops/forums.
- Demonstrate to GPs the cost benefit of employing a practice nurse, and thereby improving the GPs ability to provide primary health care, support population health initiatives and improve patient health outcomes.

There were also a range of other factors identified as important to supporting practice nurses and general practice, and these included:

Defining the practice nurse role

- Defining the clinical role of the practice nurse within the general practice setting, and connecting the development of the role of the practice nurse with the enhancement of patient health outcomes and practice outcomes.
- Learning from the NZ and UK experience - research qualitative and quantitative aspects of practice nursing as it needs to be defined in the Australian setting.

Education and training/professional development

- Improving the image and status of practice nurses, and promoting this as a specialty, ie. career pathways, and development of a tertiary based curriculum that would encompass the diversity of clinical, administrative and interpersonal skills required.
- Utilising specialist nurses to provide training, education and support programs through Divisions, including training in key chronic disease areas.
- Conducting localised, accredited courses for practice nurses.
- Providing skills training in leadership, effective communication and information management.

Divisional support and resourcing

- Analysis of cost sharing arrangements for practice nurses in different practice types, including Divisions employing practice nurses and managing nurses contracted to GPs and practices.
- Providing financial support for practice nurse networks.
- Ensuring practice nurse activities are included in Division business plans, including education and support programs.
- Identifying a key contact person in the Division and ensure that the staff member has a good understanding of issues in nursing at a local and national level, and is able to offer support, access specific information and resources.
- Ensuring that practice nurses have "whole of practice" support to enable them to participate in the broader agenda, do not separate GP support and practice nurse support.
- Conducting joint CME events that are relevant to both the GP and the practice nurse - encourage collaboration between GPs and practice nurses.
- Providing relevant information updates on current programs such as EPC, accreditation, MAHS and the new Budget initiatives, and facilitate workshops with case studies on how practice nursing can be integrated into practice activities, including IT training programs.
- Investigating incentives to encourage Practice Principles to support nurses attending workshops, education programs, etc to improve patient outcomes and quality in general practice, such as Divisions supplementing practice nurses' salaries while they are absent from practices during participation in training courses.
- Establishment of a practice nurse "locum" program.
- Meeting with the practice nurse away from the practice if they are the sole nurse.

Comment on Divisional role in supporting practice nurses: The responses to the study indicate that Divisions play a crucial role in supporting practice nurses based on their experience and existing general practice support role. Divisions also recognise the value of involving practice nurses in the development and delivery of education and support programs.

Recommendations

Communication

The study shows there is considerable merit in adopting a multi-pronged information dissemination strategy so as to meet the diverse needs of the nurses and the practice environments in which they work.

There is also a clear need to promote to GPs the role of practice nurses, and the efficiency gains that can be made in the practice by employing them. This includes developing business cases and showcasing current Divisional work with practice nurses.

It is recommended that:

1. Workshops, similar to the National Workshop convened by DHAC in July 2001, be held as matter of priority in each State and Territory.
2. The redevelopment of the ADGP website, currently underway, includes designing a dedicated page on practice nursing with appropriate links to Divisions, government, nursing organisations, etc. This should be achieved over the next six to eight weeks.
3. A clearinghouse for practice nurse initiatives and research be established through an appropriate agency.
4. A study of lead practices in Divisions be undertaken to generate evidence of the benefit, both in terms of quality patient care and financial returns, of employing practice nurses in general practice. The study should look to build on the outcomes of studies such as that by the Monash Division of General Practice¹.

To highlight the different business aspects of rural and urban practice, such a study should include GPs from both rural and urban Divisions to assist with the development of education material to promote the findings of this study to GPs through existing Divisional Networks.

To ensure GPs are provided with information to assist with business decisions relating to the roll-out of the practice nurse initiative, this study should be undertaken over the next four to eight weeks.

¹ Mathews, M. (2001) *To what extent do Practice Nurses address the structural barriers to uptake of the EPC/MBS?*, presentation to GPDV Annual Conference. March 2001

Divisional support

The key roles for practice nurses identified in the study, for example population health screening, management of recall/reminder systems, coordination of patient services and linking with other local primary health care providers, indicate a clear connection between the delivery of population health services in general practice and the five Budget initiatives. The Divisions Network has been identified as the primary organisational driver to support the roll-out of the new population health initiatives

It is therefore recommended that:

5. Financial support be provided to ensure the enhancement and sustainability of practice nurse networks through Divisions of General Practice. The development of new networks, based on successful models, should utilise existing infrastructure to avoid duplication.
6. The Divisions Network is resourced at all levels to support the successful implementation of the Practice Nurse initiative. This should include a national practice nurse coordinator position located within the ADGP to take advantage of working with national coordinators for other population health and primary health care Budget initiatives, such as Mental Health and General Practice Immunisation Incentive Programs, and to benefit from the support infrastructure available through the Divisions Network. It is envisaged that this position would be filled by an experienced nurse.

Education and training

The study provides strong evidence that Divisions play a crucial role in supporting practice nurses based on their experience and existing general practice support role. The most frequent activity undertaken by Divisions to support practice nurses was the provision of upskilling and refresher courses/programs.

Divisions also recognise the value of involving practice nurses in the development and delivery of education and support programs, and the experience of Divisions would be valuable in supporting the work being undertaken by the RACGP and the Royal College of Nursing, Australia to support practice nursing in partnership with key national nursing and general practice bodies in designing appropriate training and education programs for practice nurses.

It is recommended that:

7. The experience and expertise within Divisions is utilised in the development of curricula for education, training and professional development of practice nurses, and that Divisions are actively engaged in the delivery of such programs.