

ANF- Ninth Biennial Conference
30 October 2009

Acknowledgements

- I would like to begin by acknowledging the Guringai People, the traditional custodians of the land, and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.
- Ged Kearney, Secretary, Australian Nurses Federation, the executive team and delegates
- Delegates from every State and Territory

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. The Prime Minister sends his best wishes - he was unable to be here today but was keen for me to pass on his appreciation for the vital work you undertake in Australia's health system.

I am delighted to be addressing the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), which has worked tirelessly on behalf of nurses, midwives, nursing assistants and students - since your first meeting in Sydney some 85 years ago. It's a long standing record.

You now represent approximately 170 000 nurses from around the country, which is a credit to the work you do.

Over that period the profession of nursing has changed almost beyond recognition- but without ever losing its fundamental commitment to the welfare and wellbeing of the patient.

Today - and largely due to the persistent advocacy of the ANF - nurses are key players in decision making - in the hospital, the general practice and the aged care facility and many other settings.

You have played both a key professional role- as well as an important role in promoting and protecting the working conditions of nurses - including the key role you played in dismantling Work Choices.

There are roughly 285,000 nurses in the country - that's half the health workforce. You are an army! You are a well trained, well qualified profession that quite frankly serves as the frontline in our health system.

You are with patients at every stage of their lives.

Through strong advocacy, both prior to the last election and since, the ANF has played a key role in helping us develop our policies.

We are a Government with a firm resolve to build on our health system to make it more equitable to the most vulnerable in our community and to ensure that the system is driven by the needs of patients.

You are a vital part of our health reform agenda- and we want to walk the pathway toward a better system with you.

Today I am going to take you through some of our health reform work that we are currently undertaking as well as update you on some of the exciting reforms that are already in train.

Health Reform

It was obvious to us before we took government that while the Australian health system was still the envy of most of the world; it was beginning to creak under the weight of the challenges of the 21st century. There was a clear and urgent need for health policy reform in Australia.

We believe there is a clear acceptance in the community of the need for serious debate on the future shape of our health system, and you have a Government with the will to implement serious intergenerational reform - although it is going to be a tough road.

As an initial step, we commissioned three important pieces of work - which together constitute a swathe of recommendations for root-and-branch reform of the health system.

We have the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission Report, the Draft National Primary Health Care Strategy - the first ever - and the National Preventative Health Strategy - another first for Australia.

The common theme running through all three reports is the need for us to reshaping our health system so that we can keep people as healthy as possible for as long as possible, and treating and managing disease where appropriate in the community and as close to the home as possible.

The key directions of the Commission's report build on and extend many areas of the Government's health reform agenda so far, in areas like

workforce initiatives, primary care, prevention, better performance and accountability and addressing gaps and inequities.

Changes proposed include a better framework for accountability in primary care, and the better management of patients with chronic disease.

We know that nurses can play a key role in enhancing chronic disease management in the community - for example - diabetes educators are a key part of the multi-disciplinary team providing optimum care for people with diabetes.

And we know that the current health financing systems do not always support people getting the right care at the right time from the right health professional.

With options like voluntary enrolment for targeted cohorts of patients on the table, we have an opportunity to rethink how we can structure the system so that it is not financial considerations that drive a person to a particular health professional, but instead- and more appropriately - health need.

Such is the importance of these proposed reforms that we are now in the process of involving the entire Australian community in one of the most comprehensive consultation process ever undertaken in this country. We have already completed 65 of these consultations involving nearly 4500 people in every corner of the country.

Thank you for your active participation to date at many of these reform consultations.

We want nurses to inform that debate - demonstrating to the community the benefits that a strong and appropriately recognised nursing workforce can bring to the community.

The point I would make for now is that the proposals that we have on the table will mean a lot of change for the health workforce - changes that will create greater flexibility and greater responsibilities to nurses, as I will explain later.

There is a terrific window of opportunity for the nursing profession to continue to contribute to the debate, and indeed help shape and lead it.

Nursing Workforce Reforms

The three reports have reinforced my impressions from when, in the days of Opposition, I travelled around the country, speaking to nurses in a wide variety of situations.

While we want our health reforms to deliver a patient focused health system, we won't be able to achieve that without the solid foundation of health professionals. In short - we can't reform the system without you!

That is why we have embarked on a number of initiatives that will not only build the nursing workforce, but will encourage nurses in new career directions, providing choices and opportunities for the future.

Firstly, we are working hard to grow the next generation of nurses by funding the provision of 1134 new university nursing places.

We are backing this growth in undergraduate places by committing an unprecedented \$1.1 billion to the COAG health workforce package to reform the health workforce - which will provide \$1.1 billion to boost clinical training for our health professionals of the future, with \$28 million over the next four years to help train clinical supervisors.

This package will provide clinical training support for thousands of nursing students' right around Australia.

We are also providing \$28 million to help train many more nurse, allied health and VET supervisors and medical supervisors, to make sure those who are training the workforce of the future are also well equipped and skilled to perform their job

A critical step forward is the establishment of a National Health Workforce Agency - which will play a key role in planning the for our future health workforce needs.

I am aware that many are watching the development of this Agency with interest.

Among the key national health workforce reforms it will manage is the comprehensive planning, coordinating and funding for pre-professional entry clinical training across all health disciplines, ensuring this training

occurs in the most streamlined, integrated and educationally effective manner.

It will lead and support health workforce research, planning and policy development to inform policy decisions on workforce supply and demand, distribution, utilisation and design issues.

Finally, HWA will take a coordinated approach to workforce policy and will be a source of invaluable advice on workforce issues to me and other Health Ministers in the various jurisdictions.

This type of agency is long overdue. For the first time ever we will have a body that will work across jurisdictions, across professions and across health and education. I am sure the complexity we face in implementing this Agency comes as no surprise to you.

But, despite the potential obstacles, we will continue to negotiate with our colleagues and relevant stakeholders, including yourselves, and I am confident we will deliver on this important initiative.

Much is expected of the agency - but with high expectations comes results.

This workforce agency will be a national asset for the future.

Further, we are fulfilling our election commitment with the offer of \$40 million as the funding for Bringing Nurses Back into the Workforce initiative with the aim of - as the name suggests - bringing nurses back

into the nursing workforce over five years - including in the aged care sector.

In addition to this we are strengthening the career pathways and options for nurses and introducing the first scholarships for nurses to become nurse practitioners.

We have also of course appointed the first Commonwealth Chief Nurse and Midwifery Officer, Rosemary Bryant, and I'm very pleased we've done that. She is providing a voice for the profession for the first time at the highest levels of government both in Australia, and now, through her role with the International Council of Nurses, at an International level.

Maternity Services Reform / Nurse Practitioners

Probably most excitingly right now we are working on the implementing the reforms announced in this years budget that will enable eligible Nurse Practitioners and eligible Midwives to access the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) from November 2010.

These landmark changes open the way for improved access to maternity services, improved choice for women and to improved access to services provided by nurse practitioners.

The Maternity Reform package will provide pregnant women and new mothers with more choice in their maternity care, while maintaining Australia's proud record of safe, high-quality maternity services.

These changes fit with our commitment to ensuring that improving patient outcomes is our number one priority. We know that improving outcomes will need continuity of care, and more integrated care. I believe that we are united in that goal.

The Government is aware of the potential risk of further fragmenting patient care. We are stepping very carefully to ensure our changes deliver better outcomes for patients - and we thank the ANF for taking a pro-active part in the consultations that are occurring right now on the implementation arrangements.

This landmark legislation will soon be voted on in the Senate. While I had expected it would receive bipartisan support, recent comments by the Opposition's spokesman on health have raised doubts as to their support for the measures. Despite speaking on the Bill for a full twenty minutes, Mr Dutton was unable to say he supported giving nurses greater recognition. Further, Mr Dutton has said he will attend and speak at an upcoming doctor's rally against this legislation. While the Government wants a health system that recognises and values nurses, the Opposition is actively campaigning against them.

I think that the Opposition will find itself on shaky ground if it decides to argue against this legislation. The need for it is clear, and it has broad community support.

I firmly believe that this legislation will deliver real benefits for patients while giving our valuable nurses and midwives recognition and support.

Providing eligible Nurse Practitioners and Midwives with access to certain MBS and PBS items is a long overdue recognition of the expertise and experience of our highest trained nurses and midwives who will have the opportunity of exercising their skills to their full potential.

Like broader health reform, this initiative is not about creating problems, this is about solving them.

That is why I expect the Opposition to stop pandering to special interest groups, vote for this important legislation and demonstrate they are prepared to back our moves to implement long overdue reforms that support the growing role of nurses in our health system.

Aged Care 'Because We Care...' Campaign

I know I can't escape today without mentioning your national campaign around Aged Care.

As I've demonstrated today- we have hit the ground running implementing a range of reforms that are good for nurses and good for our communities- but we know there is more to do.

Let me assure you that the Government is aware of the problems the industry faces and is committed to ongoing investment in aged care and its workforce.

I recognise, and the Government recognises, that the presence of an appropriately skilled and motivated workforce is an integral part of

providing the high quality of aged care that older Australians need and deserve.

As the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission and other reports have made clear- there are pressing needs in aged care provision. We are aware of these and will continue to work through them.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, you will have gathered from what I have said that the Rudd Government has been busy in the two years since the 2007 election, laying the groundwork for a new health structure that will better support the health workforce and ensure our nurses can continue to provide quality health care to the Australian community.

These are exciting times. We are on the verge of some of the most wide-ranging reforms to the health system since the introduction of Medicare 25 years ago.

To ensure their success we will need to debate, discuss and agree on the outcomes.

We see the Australian Nursing Federation as a vital partner in this conversation.

I look forward to working with you, now and into the future, to create the outstanding health system that all Australians deserve.