



## A snapshot of nursing roles in primary health care

### Nursing roles in primary health care

There are in excess of 29,000 nurses in Australia employed in the primary health care setting. They work in a variety of roles providing health care for the community across the lifespan. However it should be noted that data collection with regard to these roles is inadequate and actual numbers may be greater.

Primary health care nursing roles include registered nurses, nurse practitioners and midwives working as maternal and child health nurses, general practice nurses, community health nurses, school nurses, occupational health nurses, rural nurses, remote area nurses, sexual health nurses and mental health nurses. Further detail for *some* of these roles is provided below.

#### General Practice Nurses

General practice nurses are registered nurses or enrolled nurses employed by a general practice. In 2008 there were 10,194 general practice nurses employed in these settings, with more than half (60%) of general practices reported to employ a general practice nurse.

General practice nurses work in collaboration with general practitioners, providing a range of primary health care services, including chronic disease management, lifestyle education, infection control, population health, health assessments across the lifespan, cancer management, health promotion, wound management, immunisations and women's, men's and children's health. They also provide health education and monitor its effectiveness.

#### Community Health Nurses

Community health nursing is a combination of nursing practice, public health practice, health promotion and primary health care. These nurses work with their local communities to prevent illness and promote health across the lifespan by identifying

barriers to wellness. They empower people to change unhealthy lifestyles and also provide post acute care to people in their homes. By working in partnership with, and recognising the strengths of families and communities, community health nurses seek to foster a sense of self-determination and empowerment of clients. These nurses may provide centre-based care and/or a home visiting service.

The AIHW survey indicates that, in 2008, there were 14,868 nurses employed in a community health setting.

#### Maternal and Child Health Nurses

Maternal and child health nurses are registered nurses, and in many instances midwives, with additional postgraduate qualifications in this area. These nurses offer a range of services through individual consultations, home visits and group meetings, e.g. new mothers or breastfeeding support groups. They provide health education to families to promote health and wellbeing and prevent illness; offer support and guidance to families while developing parenting skills; assess child growth, development and behaviour at key ages and stages; guide and inform families in relation to family health, breastfeeding, immunisations, nutrition, accident prevention and child behaviour and provide access to information on child and family services.

In 2008 there were 4,686 nurses working in the area of family and child health. The majority of these nurses are employed in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

#### School Nurses

Primary school nurses provide a primary health care service to school children aged 5-12 years and their families. Primary health care services are directed towards health promotion and information and early identification of and intervention for health concerns.



## A snapshot of nursing roles in primary health care

Primary school nurses engage in clinical care, health counselling, health promotion, school community development activities, networking, disseminating information and education resources, referral and general health centre management.

These nurses provide specific health surveillance activities for children at school entry as well as health assessments for all school entrants, and for any students referred by a parent or teacher. They undertake vision screening and hearing testing, immunisation, accident and injury prevention, nutrition, positive parenting and asthma management, while maintaining regular contact with students, teachers and parents.

Secondary school nurses have a key role in reducing negative health outcomes and risk taking behaviours among young people associated with drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, eating disorders, obesity, depression, suicide and injuries. The role specifically encompasses individual health counselling, health promotion and planning, school community development activities, small group work focusing on health related discussion and information and a resource and referral service to assist young people to make healthy life style choices.

Secondary school nurses therefore play a major role in health promotion and primary prevention.

These nurses develop and build on existing initiatives in schools to provide appropriate preventative health care, addressing the sensitive and complex nature of health issues for young people, their families and school community.

School nurses can provide a range of primary health care services to address many of the health and lifestyle related issues facing school aged children and their families. Without a school nurse, the responsibility for these services falls to teachers, whose

primary role is education, and as such, may be less able to manage these issues.

### Occupational Health Nurses

Occupational health nurses deliver health and safety programs and services to workers and community groups. This area of nursing practice focuses on health promotion and restoration of health, prevention of illness and injury, and protection from work related and environmental hazards.

Occupational health nurses have an integral role in facilitating and promoting an organisation's on site occupational health program. Their scope of practice includes disease management, environmental health, emergency preparedness and disaster planning in response to natural, technological and human hazards to work and community environments.

These nurses provide specialist health and safety advice and undertake injury management, first aid and emergency preparedness programs.

The role of the occupational health nurse includes but is not limited to: case management, counselling and crisis intervention, health promotion, legal and regulatory compliance, worker and workplace hazard detection, business leadership, and return to work programs for injured workers.

Occupational health nurses also develop and provide health education programs about exercise and fitness, nutrition and weight control, stress management, smoking cessation, management of chronic illnesses and effective use of health services.

#### Sources:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) *Nursing and midwifery labor force 2008*. Canberra. AIHW  
Victorian School Nurses ANF Special Interest Group (2009) *School nursing professional practice standards*. Melbourne: Victorian School Nurses ANF Victorian Branch SIG