

THURSDAY 24 MAY 2007

GP NURSES IMPROVE CARE QUALITY, BUT COST MORE

Expanded roles for Australia's general practice nursing workforce might improve the quality of care that patients receive, but employing nurses rather than doctors won't save money, according to a visiting health workforce expert.

Professor Bonnie Sibbald, a Visiting Fellow at the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI) based at ANU, said her research shows that while nurses provide high quality care, they cost more or the same as a GP.

The study examined the role of nurses in general practice where nurses were supplementary members of the team and nurses as substitutes for GPs. It found that substituting a nurse for a GP resulted in similar care, but no saving, while nurses as part of the team resulted in high quality patient care and high costs.

"Governments expect to save money by using nurses where doctors were previously working, but this is not the case - though if it's worth investing in high quality care, nurses should be an important part of the primary care team," Professor Sibbald said.

Professor Sibbald, Deputy Director of the National Primary Care Research and Development Centre at the University of Manchester, said innovation in nursing was limited in Australia by the payment system for doctors.

She said that while there was evidence of innovative practice in Australia, without the stimulation of changes to the payment system for GPs there would continue to be medical workforce shortages in this country.

"The payment system puts limits on what you can do. It's what is holding Australia back. The knowledge and the know-how is here, it's just waiting in the wings for the right moment," she said.

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