

FED: More nurses in GP clinics, but more help needed: report

By Julian Drape

CANBERRA, July 8 AAP - The number of practice nurses working in GP clinics has increased by 60 per cent since 2005 but a further growth in numbers depends on greater federal government support, a new report suggests.

There are around 8,000 practice nurses in Australia, with 58 per cent of clinics employing at least one nurse, the Australian General Practice Nursing Study, released on Wednesday, reveals.

But if nurses are to play an even greater role in delivering health care, issues regarding pay and indemnity must be resolved, lead researcher Christine Phillips says.

"GPs have been able to employ nurses because of practice payments and have found their skills and experience invaluable," the Australian National University's Dr Phillips said.

Now we need to make sure the federal government supports that role to continue, she said.

The report says nurses are concerned about the disparity of income between themselves and GPs.

"This will escalate if nurses view themselves as enhancing the doctor's income without financial recompense to themselves."

Related issues include a lack of practice-based training and career advancement.

But perhaps more pressing is the need to clarify the indemnity status of practice nurses, Dr Phillips said.

Some doctors felt they were entirely responsible for nurses working in their clinic if they didn't have their own insurance.

That led them to supervise nurses constantly, when in fact the clinic was probably liable, not individual doctors.

"This perception of liability limited the work that nurses do and is likely to continue to do so," the report states.

"This approach fails to recognise that nurses are trained and registered as independent health professionals who do not require supervision by medical personnel in order to practice."

The Australian Nursing Federation on Wednesday welcomed the report's finding that there'd been a significant shift towards "multidisciplinary care" and the use of practice nurses in general practice.

"Nurses are a pivotal part of making sure people have access to quality health care in the community," federation assistant federal secretary Lee Thomas said in a statement.

"Increasingly general practices are employing practice nurses to carry out chronic and early childhood health checks and sexual health and cancer screening checks."

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