



They're just what the doctor ordered

By Natasha Rudra

A new report confirms what practice nurse Carolyn Scrivens already knows – she is “the hub of the wheel” at the Civic doctors’ surgery where she has worked for nine years.

Ms Scrivens provides information and medical attention for patients, helps doctors with clinical tasks, and organises medical supplies.

“I do a lot of extra things,” she says.

“I’m sort of the buffer, the patient can contact me without actually disturbing the GP.”

But the report also calls for more opportunities and better pay for practice nurses, saying the profession needs more structure.

The study, *Charting New Roles for Australian General Practice Nurses*, issued yesterday, examines the role of practice nurses.

Lead author Christine Phillips said nurses who worked in a general practice played a key role in primary health care, easing the pressure on GPs.

“We found that adding a nurse to your practice adds more than just an extra position, it brings an extra quality and organisational dividend,” she said.

Dr Phillips said the number of practice nurses had increased 60 per cent over the past three years, with 8000 nurses now operating at doctors’ surgeries across Australia. But

practice nurses’ salaries were inconsistent across each state and territory and did not always reflect an individual nurse’s experience and skills.

There were also few career opportunities beyond working in a doctors’ surgery.

“Practice nursing at the moment is a career without any structure, without any agreed salary,” Dr Phillips said.

“There is no way to advance if you’re a practice nurse, it’s a very horizontal, flat structure.”

The report, funded by the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, also found practice nurses suffered from high medical indemnity costs and suggested the Federal Government should subsidise indemnity for nurses.

Dr Phillips said doctors’ groups had been cautious in their support for practice nurses but GPs “on the ground” were more welcoming. “When you go out to general practices and you talk to GPs there has been nothing but acceptance. Although professionally there may be some resistance, that’s probably a transitional stage at the higher organisational level.”

General practitioner at the Interchange Medical Practice in Civic Tuck Meng Soo said Ms Scrivens was invaluable.

“We would find it very difficult to run a practice without having a practice nurse.”



INVALUABLE: Practice nurse Carolyn Scrivens and Dr Tuck Meng Soo at the Interchange Medical practice in Civic yesterday