



ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONS AUSTRALIA

Background papers on key health policies.

Allied health professionals, along with health consumers, must be fully involved in the governance of all Primary Health Care Organisations ('Medicare Locals') and Local Hospital Networks.

Modern health care is a team affair: no one clinical discipline has all the answers. This is because a person's health status is a result of many complex factors, including inherited genes, lifestyle choices, opportunities and risks, income and employment, housing, environment, education, accidents and exposure to pathogens.

As a result, the strictly medical model of health care is now almost universally recognised as inadequate. Doctors and nurses are of course essential: but so are allied health professionals, who can offer a vast range of specialist skills to address the complex factors impinging on a person's health – their early development, eating and exercise habits, mental health, wear and tear on joints and bones, relations at home and at work, and many other things.

Keeping a person well, and dealing with their health problems, requires a multi-disciplinary approach involving doctors, nurses, consumers and allied health professionals. So it makes sense that the planning and governance of health systems should reflect the spread of expertise involved.

Sadly, this has not happened with the Federal Government's new health reforms.

The proposed Health and Hospitals Reform Package sets up a number of management structures, notably Primary Health Care Organisations (PHCOs), somewhat misleadingly called 'Medicare Locals'; and Local Hospital Networks (LHNs). The 'skeleton' on which the PHCOs are being built is the doctors' network – the Divisions of General Practice.

***'Where possible, Medicare Locals will be drawn from the Divisions of General Practice that have the capacity to take on the roles and functions expected of Medicare Locals.'*¹**

¹ National health and Hospitals Network – Fact Sheet: Establishment of Medicare Locals and better access to after hours care. Page 2. <http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/factsheet-gp-01>

***'The first group of Medicare Locals (around 15 organisations) will commence operations in mid 2011, with the remainder commencing in mid-2012. The first group will be drawn from the Divisions of General Practice network.'*²**

Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) has argued for many years that the Divisions, which receive government funding, should be broadened with a Board that includes all major health disciplines, and should therefore be named 'Divisions of Primary Care'. With one or two exceptions, this has not happened.

The reform package has further entrenched this one-sided approach to health care services. It makes the underlying assumption that Divisions of General Practice, as Primary Health Care Organisations or 'Medicare Locals', will be fund-holders, and hence critical points for determining access by consumers to services.

***'For the purpose of the modelling we have assumed PHCOs will undertake planning and service development activities for and with a wide range of primary health care services and related service providers including allied health professionals in private practice.'*³**

It is essential that allied health professionals are involved at the governance level in the development of Medicare Locals, so that communities can continue to benefit from full access to allied health, as well as to medical services.

Similar considerations are important in relation to Local Hospital Networks. Again, there is little or no recognition of the role of allied health in the governance of acute hospital services. Although the Government says that a key theme reported throughout its health reform consultations was that staff and communities did not have the opportunity to drive change, in the end only doctors and nurses appear to have been given a seat at the table...

***'Doctors and nurses will also have more of a say in hospital decision making through the establishment of clinical senates and representation in the Local Hospital Networks management structures.'*⁴**

There are more than 116,000 allied health professionals working in Australia today. They make up nearly 20% of the health workforce – almost twice as many as the medical profession (10%), although not as

² Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing YourHealth website:

<http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/AGPNSubmission>

³ Framework for development of Primary Health Care Organisations in Australia. Australian General Practice Network Boundary Modelling Project Parts 1 and 2: Introduction and State and Territory Modelling. Page 11. Web reference:

[http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/3DE5726B46CF2364CA257752007C98B4/\\$File/Final%20Framework%20for%20Development%20of%20Primary%20Health%20Care%20Organisations%20in%20Australia%20-%20Parts%201%20and%202%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.yourhealth.gov.au/internet/yourhealth/publishing.nsf/Content/3DE5726B46CF2364CA257752007C98B4/$File/Final%20Framework%20for%20Development%20of%20Primary%20Health%20Care%20Organisations%20in%20Australia%20-%20Parts%201%20and%202%20FINAL.pdf)

⁴ 'Local Hospital Networks to Deliver on Local Needs'. Federal Government news release 3 march 2010.

many as nurses (35%). But up to now they have been largely overlooked in the development of governance structures for the new health and hospitals reform package.

About AHPA

Allied Health Professions Australia (AHPA) is the national peak body for major health professions and their representative bodies other than medical practitioners, nurses and unions. AHPA works to represent the interests of the allied health professions sector, particularly to the Federal Government; and to provide a vehicle for liaison and discussion between the professions themselves.

Members of AHPA include associations of the following professions:

- Audiologists
- Chiropractors
- Diabetes educators
- Dietitians
- Exercise physiologists
- Occupational therapists
- Orthoptists
- Orthotists and prosthetists
- Osteopaths
- Pharmacists
- Podiatrists
- Psychologists
- Radiographers and radiation scientists
- Social workers
- Sonographers
- Speech pathologists
- Allied health in rural and remote Australia