

National Primary Health Care Partnership launch (26/6/08)

Thank you Kate. Minister Roxon, Dr Hobbs and invited guests. It is a great pleasure to be here to help launch the National Primary Health Care Partnership and, more importantly, to develop this Partnership and begin the journey to more effectively utilize the skills and expertise of the allied health professions to meet the health needs of Australians.

Australia has more than 90,000 allied health professionals. Many of these professionals come together in Allied Health Professions Australia, (known as AHPA), which has been working for more than a decade to encourage multi-disciplinary health care, and increase the recognition of the contribution of the expertise of the allied health professions.

AHPA has for many years worked closely with the Australian General Practice Network and its predecessor the Australian Divisions of General Practice; and it is wonderful to see this mutual cooperation, which now includes nursing, dentistry, and several other health professions, blossom into the National Primary Health Care Partnership.

AHPA's vision for primary health care in Australia is patient-centred with the health professions joining forces to work with consumers and carers to improve their health and quality of life. This requires flexible practices and an equal and collaborative partnership between all the health disciplines, including general practice, nursing and allied health.

To improve health outcomes throughout the community, **Australia's primary health care system must offer an effective, comprehensive and timely response to people's total health needs, through access to expert multi-disciplinary health care. It is most important to provide high quality services based on the best available evidence of effectiveness and utilize the diversity of expertise available.**

This approach needs to be underpinned by new models of care and funding to produce equity and increased access to health services – to whoever you are and wherever you live in Australia.

Patients need prompt and direct access to expert multi-disciplinary care – they need **'the right service from the right provider at the right time'**. They clearly must have better access to allied health providers with their range of expertise.

Allied health professionals are tertiary-qualified, autonomous health care professionals who offer consultations directly to the public. They offer a high level of expertise in their fields. The current system overly restricts access to allied health and it is timely for it to be reviewed. While it is generally acknowledged that multidisciplinary care is important, particularly for chronic and complex diseases, the current funding systems have not successfully made sufficient provision for this to occur. They need modification.

It is heartening to see that the Government is recognising the need for change, and has initiated a number of measures, including the development of a **National Primary Health Care Strategy**, to re-think the models on which Australia's health and hospital services have been based. There is now growing recognition of the crucial role that preventative health care and early intervention can play in reducing chronic illness, episodes of acute care and hospital admissions with their associated costs.

If we can treat health problems in the community within the primary care system, without having to admit people to hospital, it is obviously better for everyone.

Diabetes is a good example. People with diabetes need a range of co-ordinated allied health services, frequently including dietitians, pharmacists, exercise physiologists, podiatrists, occupational therapists and psychologists. Without adequate and timely care from these professions, people with diabetes may not be able to adhere to medication, dietary and exercise regimes resulting in secondary problems such as foot ulcers which can lead to hospitalization and sometimes even amputation. This in turn can mean that patients can become so incapacitated that they lose their independence and need to enter an aged care facility long before this might otherwise have been and which incurs unnecessary costs. Direct treatment by an allied health professional in a timely manner can often resolve such health problems with minimum expense and maximum efficiency.

To be fully effective, primary health care needs to be patient-centered and based on mutual respect amongst the health professions for the diversity of professional skills, together with a working knowledge of the expertise of each others' disciplines so that appropriate referrals can be made.

Allied Health Professions Australia will continue to work closely with the full range of health professions represented in the National Primary Health Care Partnership and the Department of Health and Ageing, to increase the understanding of the role of allied health professionals, particularly in relation to chronic disease management, which is a major population health issues.

The launch today of the National Primary Health Care Partnership is a landmark event. It is a major step towards development of a **national primary health care strategy based on a strong partnership approach to multi-disciplinary care.**

That's what Australians need – and the allied health professions stand ready to deliver it, in partnership with all our colleagues in health.

Thank you.

Professor Lyn Littlefield

**Executive Officer
Allied Health Professions Australia**