



Medical Workforce

The future of Australia's health system depends on having a skilled and effective health workforce, appropriately distributed across the population. Regardless of how much we spend on health infrastructure and technology, without the people to deliver the care that is needed, the health of Australians will suffer.

Achieving health workforce goals requires long term education and training planning processes and cooperation between governments, jurisdictions and the health and education sectors.

Australia is being affected by a worldwide shortage of health care workers; these are particularly acute in rural and remote areas. Governments have introduced a range of targeted policies to address these shortages, for example, overseas trained doctor programs, additional nursing places, subsidies for rural doctors. However, these limited strategies are not sufficient to meet the challenges facing Australia's health workforce.

There are a range of current trends that will impact upon the health workforce in the future, these include:

- ◆ increases in consumer demand (due to factors such as ageing population, and increased education levels);
- ◆ new developments in technology which impact upon education and training and can change the nature of health care;
- ◆ changing models of care, including the possibility of making greater use within managed frameworks of competition in service delivery;
- ◆ an increase in knowledge of genetic factors impacting upon disease and a trend towards more targeted therapies; and
- ◆ an increasing trend towards shorter working hours in the health workforce (partly due to ageing factors within the health workforce and also generational change).

Given these trends, it is critical that Australia puts into place a comprehensive, inter-sectoral and long term planning process to ensure an adequate health workforce for the future.

Meeting the future health care needs of the Australian population in an environment of worldwide health workforce shortages, may require looking at some radical changes to our current patterns of health care, including:

- ◆ changing the types and mix of healthcare workers, i.e. increasing numbers in some areas of the workforce and reducing numbers elsewhere;
- ◆ changing professional roles, i.e. changing the role of the GP to be a 'care coordinator and primary care team leader, rather than a sole provider of care;
- ◆ giving existing health workers new skills and knowledge, i.e. increasing the technological and data analysis skills of health workers.

These changes are likely to impact broadly on the health system and health care workers as well as on education and training sectors and other related services and professional groups.

At a recent meeting, Australian Health Ministers agreed to develop a new National Health Workforce Strategic Framework with an emphasis on looking forward and better linking health workforce needs to emerging health issues.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry is part of this process and will play an important role in informing the development of the Strategic Framework. The main areas of emphasis for the Inquiry are outlined in more detail overleaf.

The Client Solutions Advantage

Client Solutions has the research skills, medical knowledge, political experience and connections to assist organisations influence the health workforce agenda. We can help with all stages of planning, writing and following-up a submission to achieve maximum benefits for our clients.

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Areas to be investigated in the Productivity Commission Inquiry

Health Backgrounder

<p>Workforce planning</p> <p>The two key challenges in health workforce training in Australia are the public-private mix of the health system and the cross-jurisdictional responsibilities for health services.</p>	<p>Workforce participation</p> <p>Given the trend to shorter working hours in many areas of the health care sector, strategies to encourage workforce participation and increase the efficient use of the existing workforce will be vital in helping to sustain future service delivery. These should include initiatives to improve job design and job satisfaction.</p>	<p>Demand</p> <p>The growing demand for health care services has implications for institutional and regulatory arrangements for health service delivery. The Inquiry will focus on these, rather than on changes in demand for specific services.</p>
<p>Education and training</p> <p>The education and training sector plays a vital role in ensuring sufficient and appropriately qualified health care workers are available to meet our future health care needs. This sector includes universities, as well as specialist colleges and other professional organisations and institutions involved in clinical training.</p>	<p>Migration issues</p> <p>Workforce planning, education and training and regulatory requirements need to be seen in the context of the global labour market for health care professionals. Australia needs to take into account trends in migration of health care professionals into account when developing workforce strategies.</p>	<p>Regional, remote and Indigenous issues</p> <p>The specific health care needs of Indigenous Australians and people living in regional and remote areas may not be addressed through system-wide health workforce initiatives and may require targeted strategies.</p>
<p>Regulation of the health workforce</p> <p>There are a range of regulations that specify who can provide particular services, and under what conditions or in what settings. These have a direct impact on outcomes for patients and it is important that they promote greater effectiveness of the health workforce and efficiency of service delivery.</p>	<p>Productivity</p> <p>As labour is a large component of overall health care costs, increasing the productivity of the existing health workforce could achieve significant gains in service quality and access to health care services.</p>	<p>After hours GP services adjacent to acute care hospitals</p> <p>After hours medical services are an important part of health workforce policy. The Inquiry will specifically focus on the interface between after hours GP services and 'substitutable' outpatient services available at acute care hospitals.</p>

Inquiry into the Health Workforce – in brief

Key dates

Deadline for input into issues paper:	15 May 2005
Issues paper released:	31 May 2005
Submissions due:	date to be confirmed
Final report released:	28 February 2006

Terms of Reference: <http://www.pc.gov.au/study/healthworkforce/tor.html>

To register interest: <http://www.pc.gov.au/study/healthworkforce/registrationform.html>