



3rd September 2008

The Victorian Nurses Health Program (VNHP) Board and staff are pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on Issues Supplementary to the Intergovernmental Agreement on a National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for the health professions.

Please see the following background and outline of VNHP, and some recommendations relating to matters that are not included in current outline of scheme. We would advocate for these recommendations to be considered in the September forum and discussion paper.

The establishment of the Victorian Nurses Health Program (VNHP) in 2006 was an Australian first in the nursing profession, originally encouraged by the model in existence for Doctors Health, but with a model tailored to nurses.

Initiated by the Nurses Board Victoria, the Australian Nursing Federation Victorian Branch and some interested individuals from within the nursing community, the program was designed to provide assistance to nurses with addiction problems and mental health concerns. It was also designed to assist employers manage these nurse employees in a supportive professional manner, whilst ensuring maximum safety for the public using nursing services.

The program is now run independently from the Nurses Board Victoria and the Australian Nursing Federation under the governance of an independent VNHP Board. Funding, activity reports and quality compliance reports are provided to both members. This program receives annual funding from the Nurses Board Victoria from a portion of registration fees (\$400,000)

The following VNHP mission statement guides the business of the organisation:

- *Provide an initial point of contact, referral and case management support for nurses and students of nursing with alcohol and other drug problems and/or mental health concerns in order to promote individual health and well being.*
- *Reduce risks to those who use nursing services by assisting nurses to maintain their health.*
- *Provide advice and a pathway of support for employers managing nurses with health issues relating to drug and alcohol and/or mental health.*

The need for the VNHP has been demonstrated by a continuing increase in the number of nurses accessing the program through both self and employer referral. The increase in organisations contacting VNHP for advice and assistance to manage a nurse whilst

they are assessed and referred to treatment and support has increased by 170% since baseline at 6 months into operation. The result of this has been that in some cases, nurses can retain their employment or return to employment due to early stage identification and support without compromising public safety.

Preliminary outcome evaluation indicates positive health and employment outcomes for nurses. Non identifying participant statistics, including outcomes are available on request.

Recommendations

1/ VNHP would recommend that the new bill facilitates continuation of a profession specific health service for nurses funded through registration fees of nurses. The economic cost of a small percentage of nurse's registration is well returned by keeping nurses safely in practice or assisting them to return to practice. It provides an early intervention for stress and fatigue amongst nurses in the work force which is congruent with best practice in health promotion, and promotes and supports individuals and organisations to develop caring professional responses in these sensitive areas of health whilst maintaining a strong focus on safety for public health.

2/ VNHP recommend that the State offices of nursing have the autonomy to develop their own local health service response under some general evidence based guidelines. Each State has different service systems and local frameworks within which it operates and this local diversity needs to be reflected in the operations of the program. VNHP offers its consultation services, model and experience in the growth of the Victorian program to relevant State offices or National program.

Feedback from nurses and employers using VNHP about what they see as the benefits of program indicates support for VNHP recommendations.

“A profession specific confidential support program for sensitive health concerns that is run by nurses with specific local knowledge to the profession and organisational systems”

“Workers who are networked and have protocols with local service providers who assist in the treatment of the nurse means the navigation of the service spectrum is made easier”

“Professional assistance with a true understanding of the field that can liaise with employer to support a safe return to work plan”

Please note VNHP would be eager to speak with any committee member or members to respond to queries or provide further information.

VNHP would request to be placed on the mailing list for any further consultation opportunities.