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## More Practice Nurses – better patient care

More than 2000 extra Practice Nurses are expected to be employed in general practice over the next two years if the Government provides new incentive funding in the Federal Budget, says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic.

“If the reports in today’s papers are correct, there will be a major incentive to general practices to employ nurses and provide more comprehensive and integrated care for patients – it will better use the time and the full range of skills of both Practice Nurses and GPs,” Dr Djakic said.

“More Practice Nurses will enable better care for people with chronic illnesses and people who often have poor access to care, such as those living in aged care facilities, and will free up GPs so that they have more time to either spend with existing patients, or see extra patients,” he said.

AGPN has lobbied for the extension of the Practice Incentive Payment (PIP) for seven years – including in this year’s Budget submission, particularly to attract some of the 25,000 nurses who are currently not working in health care.

“Practice Nurses bring an additional skill base to the practice and alleviate pressures on General Practitioners (GPs). But many of our GPs can’t afford to employ a nurse and only those in rural and remote areas get the incentive now.

“Additional Practice Nurses will mean care is better integrated around the needs of patients and will help general practice to better deal with increasing demand for quality connected care,” he said.

About 60 percent of general practices have Practice Nurses and according to a recent AGPN survey the number of PNs has increased from 7728 to 8914 – a 15 percent increase since 2007. Previous AGPN research has identified access restrictions to the Practice Incentive Payment – it was limited to rural areas – as the main reason GPs did not employ a Practice Nurse.

“We estimate 80 percent of practices will have at least one nurse by 2012 if this additional funding comes through.

“Our business case modeling showed the average urban general practice employing a Practice Nurse part time in a clinical support role would enable a GP to see an extra 10 patients a week. This number is increased if the PN is full time and has a high skill level,” Dr Djakic said.

Practice Nurses have become an accepted additional workforce in general practice. A 2009 Australian Practice Nurses Study, of which AGPN was a partner, showed PNs bring a different skill set to practices, supporting GPs and making the practice function more efficiently.

However, additional financial incentives will be needed to assist GPs with practices too small to accommodate Practice Nurses.

“AGPN wants to see investment in the practices we already have. Infrastructure development is essential to create the kind of practices envisaged by the reform agenda – practices with multiple health professionals working together, where GPs and nurses get good training and where patients get the best quality health care,” Dr Djakic said.

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