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PRACTICE NURSES PLAY PIVOTAL ROLE: REPORT

Practice nurses ease the strain on general practitioners, but not enough doctors and policy makers recognise their pivotal role, a new report reveals.

The report's lead researcher, Dr Christine Phillips from The Australian National University, said nurses made practices more resilient and prevented burn-out among general practitioners (GPs).

"Nurses add a new dimension to general practices, improving patients' health care and making GPs working lives easier," Dr Phillips said.

The Australian Practice Nurse Study was funded by the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI), which is based at ANU. The final report found that innovative and broad-based funding, improved career progression and indemnity insurance for nurses would help attract more of them into general practice.

Data from Australian General Practice Network (AGPN), who partnered in the study, shows the number of practice nurses has increased by nearly 60 per cent since 2005. There are now about 8000 Practice Nurses in Australia. Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing incentives and funded programs such as AGPN's Nursing in General Practice support GPs to take on nurses.

Dr Phillips said while the increase in the number of practice nurses was encouraging, more needed to be done to enhance the role of practice nurses as the health care reform agenda shapes up.

"The roles of practice nurses extend beyond clinical care to incorporate education of health workers and patients, organization and quality control," she said.

"Nurses are also able to act as supporting agents to make the whole practice function more efficiently and harmoniously. GPs have been able to employ nurses because of practice payments and have found their skills and experience invaluable. Now we need to make sure the Commonwealth Government supports that role to continue – creating a real career for practice nurses and ensuring they are able to work to the peak of their capacity."

AGPN chair, Dr Emil Djakic, a Tasmanian GP, said his practice would be lost without its nurse.

"AGPN will continue to support practice nurses in general practice," Dr Djakic said. "We want to see at least one in every practice with expanded roles and this research gives us a clear idea of what we and government can do to make that a reality."

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