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210 Extra Nursing places in 2004: “a drop in the bucket”

Organisations collaborating on a national action plan for rural and remote nursing have described the planned 210 extra places in Australian Universities for nursing next year as “a drop in the bucket compared with what is needed”. David Lindsay, spokesperson for the Committee, said that the State of Victoria alone is said to have 800 vacant positions for nurses. “There has been some real ground made in improving the image of nursing across Australia, however there are thousands waiting to get into nursing but cannot. This is an untenable situation, and does little to improve the acute shortages in the nursing workforce, particularly in rural and remote areas,” Mr Lindsay said.

Nurses form the largest and most evenly distributed health profession in rural and remote Australia, and provide the greatest proportion of healthcare there. Having an effective nursing workforce in place in rural and remote areas is therefore crucial to the health of people living in such areas. There are about 70,000 nurses employed outside capital cities, compared with some 11,000 medical workers. In 1999 there were 21,397 nursing students in undergraduate basic bachelor courses. 210 more will be an extra 0.98 per cent. Some regional universities will not receive any extra places.

Over four years the total of new university places currently committed grows to 1,640 – by coincidence about the same as the number of extra practice nurses promised over the next four years in the MedicarePlus package.

Meanwhile aged care facilities cannot find the staff to stay open for 24 hours a day and hospital nurses are over-stretched.

There is another dimension to the worsening crisis in nursing workforce numbers. As well as supply shortages, the existing nursing workforce is ageing, especially in rural and remote areas, and in some areas there is an unacceptably high turnover. The pressure nurses are under in short-staffed clinical situations have seen many graduates not entering the profession or leaving shortly after registration. When combined with insufficient numbers being educated, this is what leads to the very evident and critical shortages.

“There is no doubt that the problems are multi-faceted and will only be resolved by a strategic long-term approach involving all relevant parties,” Mr Lindsay said “Action can begin with increasing the number of new places funded for nurses in our universities, and more resources for clinical nursing placements in rural and remote areas”.

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