

Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of practice review

Department of Health and Aged Care

October 2023

Improve the mental health of communities

About the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that prepares doctors to be medical specialists in the field of psychiatry, supports and enhances clinical practice, advocates for people affected by mental illness and advises governments on mental health care. The RANZCP is the peak body representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand and as a bi-national college has strong ties with associations in the Asia-Pacific region.

The RANZCP has more than 8,000 members including more than 5800 qualified psychiatrists. Psychiatrists are clinical leaders in the provision of mental health care in the community and use a range of evidence-based treatments to support a person in their journey of recovery.

The RANZCP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of practice review* being conducted by the Australian Department of Health and Aged Care. Informed by feedback from a range of members of the RANZCP's expert committees, the below submission provides the RANZCP's recommendations for considerations during the review.

The RANZCP uses the definition of scope of practice drawn from the National Mental health Workforce Strategy, that is "the utilisation of the full range of skills that a professional has been trained in and is competent to perform."^[1]

Benefits of expanded scope of practice

Who can benefit from health professionals working to their full scope of practice?

Every Australian stands to benefit from health professionals working to their full scope of practice. From people accessing the health care system and their carers, to the health professionals treating them and the governments funding them, practitioners working to full scope of practice maximises the use of available skills and specialisations.^[2] This can contribute to optimising individual and multidisciplinary team performance, improving patient care, and creating a healthcare system that is effective and efficient.^[2]

While Australia is home to many skilled health professionals and excellent service providers, barriers remain to providing timely and appropriate healthcare. A robust and multidisciplinary workforce is essential for ensuring a connected and well-functioning health system, including the mental health system. Current shortages of health professionals are placing significant strain on the capacity of the system to deliver high-quality, accessible care.

Facilitating practitioners to work to their full scope of practice is a way to optimise the functioning of the workforce we do have. It can support practitioners to feel fulfilled and engaged in their role and improve patient outcomes.^[3] Successful expanded scope of practice trials found improved patient access to care and patient satisfaction, and full or expanded scope of practice may increase job satisfaction for practitioners by providing opportunities for increasing skills, learning and development, and taking on new responsibilities.^[3, 4] Clarity on a person's scope of practice can also foster a strong sense of professional identity for practitioners and support clear roles and responsibilities in interdisciplinary teams.^[1] Providing occupational opportunities with advanced roles, such as advanced practice nurses, can also help to make services more available and meet otherwise unmet needs in the community.^[2] As many primary practice workers will engage in opportunistic mental health care for their patients, this may be recognised as an element of their scope of practice, and providing training pathways and opportunities to upskill in mental health could further maximise the capability of the healthcare workforce.^[1]

The benefits of working to full scope of practice flow throughout the healthcare system from primary, to secondary, to tertiary roles and its importance is recognised in the *National Mental Health Workforce Strategy* which identifies practitioners working to their top of their scope of practice as a priority area under Strategic Pillar 2: Maximise, Distribute and Connect.[1]

Facilitating best practice

What enablers can government, employers and regulators address to enable health practitioners to work to their full scope of practice?

All stakeholders have a role in enabling every worker across the healthcare system to practice to their full scope. Cumulatively, this can contribute to a more effective and efficient healthcare system for all Australians.

Increasing the number of Mental Health Nurses

The RANZCP recognises that mental health nurses have clinical skills that are complementary to psychiatric care and contribute to a team-based approach in the private sector. Funding mental health nurse positions would bridge critical gaps in psychiatric health care, particularly in community settings, by utilising the clinical skills of nurses and increasing the profession's capacity to treat people with mental health issues.

Specifically, mental health nurses provide invaluable support to private psychiatrists in assisting with follow-up and review, which is critical given most psychiatrists have high caseloads and limited capacity. The Mental Health Nurse Incentive Program (MHNIP), established in the 2006 COAG Mental Health Package, provided an incentive payment to community-based general medical practices, private psychiatrist services and other appropriate organisations who engage mental health nurses to assist in the delivery of clinical care for people with severe mental health conditions. It was reviewed in a 2010 evaluation commissioned by the National Advisory Council on Mental Health and undertaken by the [Australian Healthcare Associates](#) which found that 'overall there was wide acceptance of the program and feedback from all stakeholders was extremely positive'.

In 2016-17, MHNIP funding was transitioned to the PHN primary mental health flexible funding pool. Since that funding move, it has been difficult for psychiatrists to secure funding from the program to employ a nurse to support them in practice. Scoping and identifying a contemporary model would enable more practitioners to employ a nurse in a practice setting which would assist psychiatrists to allocate more time to patients with complex needs.

Supporting General Practitioners (GPs) in mental health care

Good communication between GPs and psychiatrists is crucial to support best practice clinical collaboration and provide high quality treatment to patients. Cross-disciplinary partnerships support coordinated approaches to complex challenges, and facilitate opportunities for GPs to provide mental health care for low acuity patients without needing referral for specialist care.[1] Enabling GPs to work to their full scope of practice regarding mental health care can in turn reduce wait lists.[1]

Providing GPs with the opportunity to consult with psychiatrists on diagnosis, treatment, and safe and appropriate prescribing can facilitate GPs working to their full scope of practice while also enabling

psychiatrists to allocate their time to the most complex and acute patients who require treatment from a specialist.[1]

The RANZCP has also heard from our members that there a need to improve the coordination for GPs to receive patients back from psychiatrists who are stable and require ongoing monitoring but not intensive psychiatric support. For example, a patient who is stable on long-term medication and does not currently require psychotherapy may be referred back to their regular GP for ongoing prescribing and monitoring. Enabling GPs to work to their full scope of practice may reduce some of these challenges associated with transfer of care, which can contribute to optimal patient outcomes and create capacity for psychiatrists to accept new patients.

Ensuring that people are appropriately triaged into the degree of care they require will help to optimise the workforce and avoid underutilisation of skills and expertise. Patients with low acuity conditions might require digital or community-based providers, while more complex or acute patients may require the services of a psychiatrist or other specialist.[1]

Certificate of Postgraduate Training in Clinical Psychiatry

The Certificate of Postgraduate Training in Clinical Psychiatry is a new course due to be offered by the RANZCP in 2024 that will enable medical practitioners in Australia to learn new skills in mental health assessment and support. It provides an introduction to foundational concepts in psychiatry, under clinical supervision by experienced psychiatrists.

The aim of the Certificate is to reduce workforce pressures and improve access to skilled mental health support in the Australian community. Completing the Certificate could assist in expanding the potential scope of practice of Certificate graduates and increasing patient access to timely mental health care.

It is designed for:

- general practitioners
- rural generalists
- emergency medicine physicians
- other medical practitioners who assess and support the mental health of their patients.

The Certificate of Postgraduate Training in Clinical Psychiatry is not intended as a pathway into specialist psychiatry training, rather it will provide participants with training in core mental health assessment and therapeutic skills that can be applied to all age groups, populations, and mental health problems or diagnoses.

Please see [Certificate of Postgraduate Training in Clinical Psychiatry](#) for more information.

Clarity on scopes of practice

Employers and regulators providing clarity on scope of practice can help ensure that practitioners, particularly those on multi-disciplinary teams, understand roles and responsibilities and can foster increased a sense of professional identity.[1] It is critical for an efficient workforce that practitioners and patients understand who can perform what services in which settings.[1]

Conclusion

There is a critical shortage of mental health care workers, which means access to care is often delayed by long wait lists. Without timely access to care, people's conditions can worsen and result in their needing more intensive, costly, and time-consuming care when they do receive it. Investment and workforce

planning are critical to build for the future. Enabling practitioners to work to their full scope of practice is another step towards creating a more efficient and effective system that makes the most of the workforce we currently have.

Such enablement has the potential to improve patient outcomes, reduce wait times, and boost job satisfaction which can contribute to the *National Mental Health Workforce Strategy* Pillar 3: Retain.

Australia has a motivated, highly skilled, and compassionate health care workforce. Enabling them to work to their full scope of practice can contribute to a healthcare system that provides the best care possible for all Australians while supporting practitioners to learn and thrive in their roles.

The RANZCP looks forward to continuing to engage with the *Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce – Scope of practice review* as it progresses. If you would like to discuss this further, please contact Nicola Wright, Executive Manager, Policy, Practice, and Research via nicola.wright@ranzcp.org or on (03) 9236 9103.

References

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