

Aged Care Leaders, Mentoring & Ratios

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According to the current Australian Bureau of Statistics data in 2018, one in every six Australians are 65 years or older (3.9 million people). Currently there are approximately 270,000 older persons living in residential Aged Care accommodation. Demand for Aged Care service provision is ever increasing as Australia's population ages.

The recruitment and retention of a skilled and sustainable workforce to assist with caring for Australia's ageing population has been the topic of research and discussion for decades. To date, there has been no real solutions developed for this widespread problem.

There are some real challenges for Aged Care providers, and workers in today's Aged Care services environment.

Some issues identified for Aged Care workers and Clinical Managers are:

- A deficiency in education programs
- A lack of incentives to undertake further education
- Lack of mentoring and leadership programs for new staff or skills and training programs for Registered Nurses and Managers
- Reluctance to support and have staff ratios and skills mixing in place for safe, quality care delivery

Some challenges for providers include

- The capability to comply with strict regulatory requirements to guarantee delivery of high-quality service to meet consumer needs in a timely manner
- Creating a positive workplace culture and be a 'provider of choice for employees' to entice new, and retain existing, high calibre staff

A number of these challenges can only be relieved when regulatory bodies and Aged Care providers view this workforce as an asset, not an expense. Aged care workers provide a unique and professional service to our older, vulnerable people. To excel, they must feel valued, be paid appropriately, and be provided opportunities for professional growth and development.

Continuing Education Support

According to research conducted by Xiao (2020) "employer-sponsored education enables staff to develop their careers and contribute to retention rates.

Staff expect paid education to develop their leadership and teamwork skills. Strong leadership in the Aged Care workforce has been found to contribute to staff intention to remain.

Continuing education and mentorship for managers and registered nurses to develop knowledge about staff issues and effective leadership will help reduce staff turnover."

This provides clear evidence that in-house education programs and support are one of the key strategies in the inducement of new and retention of current staff.

Leadership

"True leaders always practice the three 'R's': Respect for self, Respect for others and Responsibility for all their actions" Anonymous.

Nursing is an energetic and demanding profession requiring role models and leaders who are motivated to inspire others. This is especially true in the Aged Care sector.

In today's ever changing and demanding Aged Care setting, one of the keys to leading a dynamic effective team and driving culture change is by recognising and encouraging potential and current nurse leaders and senior Registered Nurses.

According to Dwyer (2016), until they are presented with provider-led leadership education programs, nurses will continue to feel undervalued if there is no support for their roles. High quality, clinical

leadership skills training is needed for nurses to transition through practice into specialised roles such as the Team Leader, Care Manager and Aged Care Nurse Practitioner (GNP). Providing opportunities for professional development and structured career progression can only improve recruitment and staff retention.

Mentoring

Mentoring is defined as supporting and encouraging another person to manage their own learning in order that they may expand their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the best professional they can be.

Nurses at all levels of experience require support and guidance when undertaking a new or different role. Mentoring can be delivered formally, or informally. Delivery depends on the individual skills, availability and requirements of the mentor and the mentee.

Mentoring programs are proven to be an invaluable activity. It enhances the participant's skills, knowledge and confidence in their professional ability.

Mentoring principles also depend upon the elements of supportive management, flexibility in schedules, incentives, and recognition. These aspects all reinforce the importance of mentoring in the context of staff stability, performance and retention.

Based on the latest nursing research, from the perspective of organisational culture and leadership, mentoring is a long-term commitment. A considered, planned solution rather than a short-term undertaking will lead to improved staff retention, satisfaction, and ultimately, to positive consumer outcomes.

Staff to Resident Ratios in Aged Care

Aged care staff to resident ratios are viewed by nursing industry bodies as part of the solution of maintaining quality staff, and providing quality care to the older persons in our community. There has been much discussion in relation to this topic, and although it appears there is no real resolution in sight yet, there is hope for improvement.

The Aged Care sector is regulated by the federal government. There is currently no federal law mandating minimum nurse to resident ratios. According to the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Council (2020) 'The Victorian government has pledged \$40 million to help cover the cost of introducing minimum staff-to-resident ratios in private Aged Care, as long as the Commonwealth government, the primary regulator and funder of the sector, also comes to the table'. Victoria is currently the only Australian State with mandated minimum staff ratios in the residential Aged Care sector.

Government Incentives for Registered Nurses working in Aged Care

In an effort to reward clinical skills and leadership, and encourage nurses from other sectors into Aged Care, the Federal Government has recently announced the launch of a new scheme called the *Aged Care Registered Nurse Payment Initiative*. This initiative provides full-time registered nurses who work for the same Aged Care provider for 12 months with \$3,700 each year in 2022 and 2023. Additional incentives are available nurses in a rural or remote areas, who hold a post-graduate qualification, undertake professional development or training, or take on additional leadership or training responsibilities in their workplace.

The scheme is part of the 2022-2023 budget provisions aimed at recognising the invaluable contribution Aged Care nurses make to elderly Australians. Other incentives to bolster the sector include expansions to the *Aged Care Transition to Practice Program* and *Aged Care Nursing Scholarships*.

Although these are strong steps in the right direction, until Federal and State Governments, Aged Care providers and key nursing industry bodies can work collaboratively and reach a consensus on the critical importance of staff education, mentoring and leadership programs, minimum staff ratios and appropriate remuneration in Aged Care, the challenges currently facing the sector are unlikely to ease.

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