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Practice nurses play key role as challenges face GPs

A report released today that analyses data for the first time on the roles played by nurses in general practice has been welcomed by Australia's peak body representing general practice, the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

The results from the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health program (BEACH) report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the University of Sydney, indicate the critical role practice nurses play in providing effective care in the general practice setting.

AGPN Chair Dr Tony Hobbs said practice nurses are core members of the general practice team.

"Being able to effectively attract and retain practice nurses not only helps patient care but eases problems being faced due to GP workforce shortages, increasing incidences of chronic disease and Australia's ageing population.

"There are additional strains on GPs. Nurses in general practice are able to take some pressure off GPs, allowing for more consultations and the provision of improved team based care arrangements.

"Practice nurses perform many procedures such as pap smears, immunisations, wound management and promote and deliver health education. This frees up GP's time to concentrate on more complex medical problems and coordinate care arrangements for those with chronic illness," Dr Hobbs said.

An AGPN survey conducted last year showed there were almost 5000 practice nurses in Australia, with 57% of practices employing a practice nurse- a 23% increase compared to 2003.

In February this year AGPN will have a free practice nursing resource kit available to GPs, nurses and the Divisions Network explaining the benefits of working as a practice nurse, the types of activities they can do and how best to attract and retain them.

The *Practice Nurse Recruitment and Orientation to General Practice* kit funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing aims to increase the number of practice nurses available to work in general practice.

Dr Hobbs, a GP in the NSW Riverina district said he sees everyday the benefits of practice nurses in his busy rural practice.

"Utilising the skills of my own practice nurse, I have managed to reduce waiting times, improve access to the practice and offer a wider range of services to my local community," Dr Hobbs said.

The resource kit is another example of AGPN delivering local health solutions through general practice. It can be accessed from February this year at www.agpn.com.au The AIHW report is at <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/index.cfm/title/10377>

For more information please call Kate Carnell, ADGP Chief Executive Officer, on 0415 662 266.