



Position Statement – Undergraduate Mental Health Nursing Education

Introduction

Changes to Australian nursing education implemented late last century signalled the end of specialist education in mental health nursing practice at the undergraduate level. The comprehensive nursing curriculum introduced was intended to provide nursing knowledge and skills at the basic level in a broad range of health care settings, with mental health nursing specialisation expected to occur at the postgraduate level (Foster & Hurley, 2024).

The comprehensive program has been consistently criticised for providing inadequate theoretical and clinical preparation in mental health nursing. Despite numerous reports and research findings calling for increased mental health nursing content, the situation has worsened over time. This has resulted in many nurses being inadequately prepared to care for people in mental distress on graduation (Lakeman et al., 2024).

Approximately 22% of the Australian population experience a mental health condition in a 12-month period, increasing to 43% for lifetime prevalence (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Prevalence is higher for people accessing health care settings for physical health conditions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). Research demonstrates that registered nurses generally have negative views towards people with mental health conditions, and mental health nursing is one of the least desirable practice areas for commencing students (Pasere et al., 2025). Undergraduate nursing education, therefore, has a responsibility to provide sufficient theory and practice in mental health nursing to adequately prepare nurses to care for people in mental distress, engender more positive attitudes to mental health, and encourage some graduates to pursue a career in this field.

In Australia, there is no formal requirement for postgraduate qualifications to practice in mental health nursing, leading to significant numbers of nurses lacking the mental health skills, knowledge and attitudes required to effectively practice in this field.

Position

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses is the voice of the mental health nursing profession in Australia. We represent Mental Health Nurses across all levels of government and health service sectors. Acknowledging the importance of educational preparation in mental health, it is our position that:

- Current undergraduate nursing programs require considerable strengthening to include, at a minimum, one compulsory mental health theory unit and at least 160 hours of clinical placement. Additional mental health nursing units offered as electives or minors are encouraged.
- Clinical placement should occur within a designated mental health setting. Medical-surgical and aged care settings (for example) are not specialised mental health settings. Health services and education providers should work together to enable appropriate placements.



- Theory and clinical components at undergraduate and postgraduate level must be taught and supervised by nurses with specialist qualifications in mental health nursing.
- Mental health specialist preparation should be enhanced by including additional pathways in undergraduate programs, including, but not limited to:
 - o Specialist direct entry programs in mental health nursing at the undergraduate level
 - o Double degrees in nursing/mental health nursing
 - o Majors (however termed by universities) in mental health nursing
 - o Employers of nurses in mental health settings should require specialist mental health nursing qualifications or working towards them.

Strengthened undergraduate and alternative pathways to mental health specialisation will contribute to nurses' confidence and competence in caring for people with mental distress and strengthen the mental health nursing workforce. Collaboration with mental health services and consumers and carers will facilitate high quality programs, facilitating quality mental health service delivery and supporting better outcomes for people with mental health conditions and their families and carers.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023). National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020–2022. Australian Government. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/mental-health/national-study-mental-health-and-wellbeing/2020-2022>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). Physical health of people with mental illness. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mental-health/topic-areas/health-wellbeing/physical-health>
- Foster, K., & Hurley, J. (2024). Every Nurse Is Not a Mental Health Nurse — Critical Reflections on Myths and Controversies About Mental Health Nursing. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 33(4), 737–738.
- Lakeman, R., Foster, K., Happell, B., Hazelton, M., Moxham, L., & Hurley, J. (2024). Informing the development of a fit-for-purpose mental health nursing curriculum: A survey of mental health nurse academics in Australia. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 33(1), 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.13226>
- Pasere, E., O'Hara, D., Ballard, E., Kilgour, C., & Holland, L. (2025). A narrative review of medical and surgical nurses' attitudes and perceptions when caring for patients with a secondary diagnosis of mental illness. *Nurse Education Today*, 106684.