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Mental health nurses critical to deliver election promises to better mental health service provision

The Australian College of Mental Health Nurses (ACMHN) welcomes an announcement made yesterday by the Hon Julie Collins and Senator Deborah O’Neill for \$20 million in funding for mental health nurses to be provided through Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

The announcement was made as part of the Australian Labour Party’s commitment to invest \$1 billion to drive vital mental health and suicide prevention reform.

The ACMHN CEO Kim Ryan said “we are very pleased to see that the Australian Labor Party has acknowledged the need to invest in a mental health nursing solution for Australia”.

“Developing and sustaining a mental health nursing workforce is vital to improve service access and equity for people with mental health problems across the age spectrum” Ms Ryan said.

The ALP have also announced

- \$197 million to trial four headspace Plus community-based hubs for youth mental health where headspace Plus will receive support from a range of mental health experts including mental health nurses.
- \$20 million to create Australia’s first ever National Plan for Eating Disorders and Body Image Research.

The College welcomes all announcements made in relation to mental health, however, cautions that these announcements will require significant support and investment in a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce to deliver on the promises.

Ms Ryan said, “Australians have a right to access mental health care from specialist mental health nurses. We will be unable to meet the growing mental health needs of the community and deliver on these election promises if there is no investment in the development of the mental health nursing workforce.”

Since 1993, there have been nine reports which recommended urgent action to expand the mental health nursing workforce, as well as upskill all nurses and midwives around mental health - starting at an undergraduate level – however, to date there has been very little investment in this type of workforce development.

“We have known for years that without investment in mental health nursing, the system will not cope. Predictions from years ago are unfolding as we speak - we need action on workforce development now,” said Ms Ryan.

“We currently have no way of identifying nurses with specialist mental health nursing qualifications, and services are already struggling to recruit suitably qualified nurses. Increasing the recognition of the specialist work of mental health nurses is a priority – this could be achieved through a process of endorsement of mental health nursing qualifications on the nursing register.”

Mental health nurses are an affordable, accessible specialist mental health workforce who have the knowledge and specialist skills to be part of the solution.

We call on all parties and candidates to work with the Australian College of Mental Health Nurses to address the current and predicted future workforce shortages as a matter of urgency.

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