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For immediate release

The VHA supports new roles for health professionals

A major shake-up of the way health professionals operate in the health system is needed to address a chronic skills shortage nation-wide, a peak public healthcare body has said.

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) chief executive Trevor Carr supports Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon's commitment to review the role of health professionals as part of the government's primary health care strategy.

Mr Carr said a radical transformation of the health workforce is looming due to pressures on the public healthcare system caused by the dual impacts of an ageing population and an ageing workforce.

The VHA has consistently lobbied both state and federal governments for the creation of multidisciplinary teams of healthcare professionals that transcend traditional workplace boundaries to better meet the health needs of Australians.

"Alternative strategies that meet the needs of the population and are underpinned by quality and safety have been demonstrated worldwide and are a necessary transition for the contemporary health system to meet contemporary health needs," Mr Carr said.

"These changes will ultimately disrupt traditional workplace hierarchies. But the end result will be a more efficient, effective and sustainable health system.

"As the available workforce is shrinking, workforce innovation and flexibility are required to meet public demand and overcome a shortage of general practitioners, particularly in rural areas."

The VHA has highlighted the nurse practitioner model as one example of where a more flexible approach to workforce training and scope of practice is already producing results.

In its recent submission to the National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission, the VHA highlighted the Rural Men's Health Nurse Practitioner Project established at Bendigo Community Health in 2003 to improve access to men's health services. This project founded a Men's Health and Wellbeing Clinic, open one evening a week, to successfully engage a 'hard to reach' target audience.

Mr Carr said the Bendigo CHS Rural Men's Health Nurse Practitioner model demonstrates how a flexible system based on workforce innovation can better meet a local community's health needs.

The VHA notes that for any workforce change to be effective, it must be backed by flexible funding models, pragmatic partnerships and effective leadership.

"The VHA supports the development of any practical alternatives that improve both the health of the population and the effectiveness of the public healthcare system," Mr Carr said.

The Federal Government review should focus on workforce development - from education and training through to recruitment and also incentives to retain staff and clinical risk and scope of practice issues.

The VHA is the peak advocacy body representing public healthcare interests in Victoria. Its members include public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities.

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