



A snapshot of nursing in Australia

Who are Nurses?

Nurses form the largest health profession, providing health care to people across their lifespan. They work independently or as collaborative members of a health care team in settings which include hospitals, rural and remote nursing posts, Indigenous communities, schools, prisons, aged care homes, the armed forces, universities, TAFE colleges, mental health facilities, statutory authorities, general practice offices, businesses, professional organisations and people's homes.

Nurses provide professional and holistic care in a range of circumstances. They work to promote good health, prevent illness, and provide care for the ill, disabled and dying. Nurses also work in non-clinical roles to educate new nurses, conduct research into nursing and health related issues and participate in developing health policy and systems of health care management.

The Nursing Profession in Australia

Nursing and midwifery are regulated professions. By law, before nurses and midwives may practise, they must be registered, enrolled, endorsed or authorised by their state or territory nursing and midwifery regulatory authority (NMRA).

Australia has two levels of licensed nurse - registered nurses and enrolled nurses¹. Registered nurses working at an advanced level and holding a recognised post-graduate qualification may be eligible to seek status as a nurse practitioner. See also: [A Snapshot of Nurse Practitioners](#).

The titles of 'registered nurse', 'enrolled nurse', 'midwife' and 'nurse practitioner' are protected by legislation, and these titles may only be used when permitted by the state or territory

NMRAs. Another group of health care worker, assistants in nursing (AINs)², also deliver aspects of nursing care. Assistants in nursing do not yet have a consistent minimum standard of educational preparation and are not regulated by the NMRAs. The ANF supports the regulation of AINs through licensing. There are 68,500³ AINs in Australia, who are mostly employed in aged care.

Nursing and Midwifery Education

Registered nurses must complete a three year bachelor degree at university before they are eligible to register with their NMRA. They undertake a period of post-registration graduate support in a hospital, usually a year, and then go into professional nursing practice. They may also undertake post-graduate study to specialise in one of many clinical practice areas.

Enrolled nurses are educated in the vocational education and training (VET) sector for one year to eighteen months, to either a Certificate IV or Diploma level, before being qualified to enrol with their NMRA. They may also undertake additional study to work at a more advanced level. In some states and territories, enrolled nurses are able to gain a qualification which enables them to administer some medicines to patients.

Midwives either undertake a bachelor degree in midwifery, or are registered nurses who hold a recognised post-graduate midwifery qualification.

1. Known as Division 1 (RN) and Division 2 (EN) in Victoria.
2. Assistants in nursing and other unlicensed workers, however titled.
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006). Australia's Health 2006. Canberra: AIHW, p 316.



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Facts about the Nursing Workforce

With a combined total of 254,956, registered and enrolled nurses comprise over 54% of the entire health workforce⁴. The health workforce also includes medical practitioners, dentists, physiotherapists, pharmacists, occupational therapists, podiatrists and other allied health professions.

A census of the nursing workforce is conducted every two years. The most recent figures were released in 2008, and cover the year 2005⁵:

Registered Nurses	206,873
Enrolled Nurses	48,083
Midwives	18,297
Nurse Practitioners	300

In 2005, there were 23,705 (10.3%) registered nurses and 6,958 (12.6%) enrolled nurses not employed in the nursing profession⁶. There are a range of reasons nurses choose not to work in the profession.

Nursing Trends and Demographics⁷

Females make up the largest proportion of the nursing labour force, and this trend is increasing. The proportion in 2001 was 91.6%, and in 2005 it was 92.1%.

Over 62%, or 152,890 nurses work in major cities. Just over 31%, or 76,270 work in regional and rural areas, and 6%, or 5,480 nurses work in remote or very remote areas.

The average age of nurses is increasing. The average age of employed nurses in 2005 was 45.1 years, up from 42.2 years in 2001. The proportion of nurses aged over 50 is 35.8%.

Nurses and midwives worked an average of 33 hours per week in 2005. This is up from 2001, when they worked 30.7 hours per week.

Where do Nurses Work?

Most nurses work in an area of clinical practice. Clinical practice areas broadly include:

Medical and surgical, aged care, critical care, perioperative, midwifery, emergency, general practice, community health, mental health, family and child health, rehabilitation and disability, rural and remote health and occupational health and safety.

Those working in non-clinical practice areas may work in state and territory health departments, NMRAs, professional and industrial bodies, universities, TAFE colleges and hospitals. These non-clinical practice roles include:

Management and administration, education, research, policy development and analysis, professional advice, advocacy and regulation.

4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008). Nursing and Midwifery Labour Force 2005. Canberra, p 5

5. Nursing and Midwifery Labour Force 2005, pp 2, 6.

6. Nursing and Midwifery Labour Force 2005, p 6.

7. Nursing and Midwifery Labour Force 2005, pp viii, 12.