



26 July 2006

Ms Dianna Smith
The Office of the Australian Safety
and Compensation Council
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Dear Ms Smith

Re: Raising awareness of occupational diseases among general practitioners

The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) read with interest your discussion paper on raising awareness of occupational diseases among general practitioners. We agree that occupational diseases generally are not well assessed or managed by general medical practitioners (GPs) and their understanding of what constitutes occupational diseases can be limited.

The ANF considers that the short term options recommended in the discussion paper are acceptable and practical. It is our experience that the development of 'tools' such as the examination form mentioned is a widely utilised and well established option that GPs and other health professionals who work in general medical practices like to use and find beneficial.

The ANF, however, encourages the ASCC to look further than the current scope of the issues put forward in the discussion paper, which concentrates solely on GPs as the managers and assessors of occupational disease in a primary care context. The development of the role practice nurses play in primary care could be a vital key to this problem.

The type of health care provided by general practices is essentially primary health care. The trend is moving away from sole practitioner GPs to larger multi practitioner, multidisciplinary primary care clinics. The Australian Divisions of General Practice are actively encouraging sole practitioner GPs to employ a practice nurse and currently nearly 60% of general practices employ practice nurses. Many Divisions of General Practice also contract practice nurses to deliver services on a 'sessional' basis to GPs. An occupational health nurse for example is ideally placed to provide sessional services and support directly to general medical practices or through the Divisions of General Practice.

The Australian Government provides financial incentives for GPs to employ practice nurses and some of the care provided by them have a Medicare item number and attract a Medicare rebate to the general practice, such as diabetes care, wound care and pap smears. Research has shown the clients are accepting of the care provided by practice nurses and that health outcomes are positive.

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Practice nurses roles are varied and depend on demographics, the size of the practice and location eg. rural or metropolitan. Practice nurse would be competent as part of their role to assess for and assist in the management of occupational diseases. Many nurses have specialised qualifications in Occupational Health at a post graduate level and are working in the field currently, eg. in large businesses, factories and health facilities. They have a good understanding of occupational hazards, potential and actual disease manifestation and incidence and management strategies.

Involving a nurse with such expertise in a primary health care setting would greatly enhance the important part general practice plays in assessing and managing occupational diseases and conditions. Many nurses with the expertise would welcome the opportunity to use their skills in such a setting, and outcomes could eventually be such that hospital admissions for chronic and acute occupational diseases decrease due to effective management in the community by the general practice. A practice nurse with occupational health qualifications could work in conjunction with the GP assisting in definitive assessment and management of many occupational related health conditions, relieving the work load of the GP and enhancing health outcomes for the community.

The ANF would like to suggest that a scoping study be conducted to determine the full advantage such a role would bring to general medical practice or other primary care facilities. Such a study would involve examining the role practice nurses could play in occupational health and its potential application; the attitude of GPs to the idea; stakeholder opinions and implementation strategies. The ANF would be very happy to discuss such a project further with the OASCC.

If you would like to discuss our comments further, please contact Gerardine (Ged) Kearney, ANF Assistant Federal Secretary at the ANF Melbourne office (03-9639 5211 email: ged@anf.org.au).

Yours sincerely



GERARDINE KEARNEY
Assistant Federal Secretary.

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