Upper House inquiry backs need for registered nurses in aged care

A report into the role of registered nurses within residential aged care in NSW has found they are essential to high-quality care and recommends the retention of a legal minimum requirement to ensure registered nurses are on duty at all times.

The Legislative Council Committee report confirms registered nurses are pivotal to the skill-mix of staffing in residential aged care facilities, particularly sites with high and complex care residents, and recommends amendments to language discrepancies between NSW and Commonwealth laws.

Brett Holmes, General Secretary of the NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), welcomed today’s tabling of the report and said he was hopeful the report’s 17 recommendations would be seriously considered by the NSW Government.

“Our aged care members are buoyed by the large number of detailed recommendations that have been put forward in the Upper House Committee’s report,” Mr Holmes said.

“The volume of evidence supporting the minimum requirement for registered nurses to be on duty around the clock in facilities with high care residents speaks for itself and the Committee has diligently outlined how it can be retained and strengthened at the Commonwealth level.

“The Committee has recognised the need for minimum staffing ratios to be established and recommends the NSW Government urge the Commonwealth to adopt ratios throughout the aged care sector.

“We also welcome the recommendation for the government, through the Council of Australian Government’s (COAG) to address the wage disparity between registered nurses in aged care and their counterparts in the public health care system,” he said.

The four-month inquiry, conducted by the General Purpose Standing Committee No.3, also found shifts led by a registered nurse often reduced unnecessary hospitalisations and increased the quality of clinical care within residential aged sites.

More than 160 written submissions were made during the inquiry by community groups, local governments, aged care workers, relatives, health advocacy groups and aged care providers.

A large number of the submissions support calls for the NSW Government to retain the legal requirement to keep registered nurses in residential aged care 24/7 and highlight the need for more attention to be directed towards the future of aged care service delivery.

Earlier this month, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) called on the Federal Government to develop an aged care workforce strategy. The ANMF warned that the amount of quality care provided to the elderly would continue to be compromised unless a suitably skilled and qualified workforce was delivered.
Yesterday, Federal Health Minister Sussan Ley confirmed rural and remote residential aged care was in her sights for reform and that she was in the process of developing a finance plan, however, no specific details were released.

Mr Holmes said if the NSW Government abrogated its duty of care and removed the legal requirement for registered nurses in NSW, the state’s aged care sector would deteriorate and elderly residents and families who rely on these services would suffer.

“It’s not good enough for the NSW Health Minister to continually divest herself of responsibility to the people of NSW – especially the elderly and frail who deserve a dignified journey through their final years,” Mr Holmes said.

“We would encourage the Minister to adopt the Upper House Committee’s recommendations in full for the betterment of aged care service delivery throughout NSW.

“Thousands of community members across the state have spoken out on this issue and the Minister must listen to these constituents.”

The NSWNMA has submitted more than 24,000 signatures on a community petition to NSW Parliament to retain the legislative requirement for registered nurses in aged care and the associated requirements for directors in nursing.

The NSWNMA has vowed to continue lobbying on behalf of registered nurses, enrolled nurses and assistants in nursing in the aged care sector, to ensure residents receive the highest quality care.

Further details of the NSWNMA’s ongoing campaign can be found here.

A copy of the Legislative Council Committee’s report is available here.

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