



**Submission to the Legislative Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory
Standing Committee on Health and Disability.**

Inquiry into Health Science in the ACT

Enhancing Nursing and Allied Health Research Development in the ACT

Executive summary:

- Nursing and Allied Health Research in the ACT requires substantial ongoing support from the ACT Government.
- Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health research development needs to occur within an interdisciplinary framework.
- A continuing strong relationship between ACT Health and the University of Canberra Faculty of Health has the capacity to further enhance Nursing and Allied Health research capacity in the ACT.

Background:

A **strong** Nursing and Allied Health Research Sector attracts high quality nursing and allied health staff to the ACT and Capital Region. Allied health disciplines such as Exercise Physiologists, Physiotherapists, Nutritionists and Dieticians have a critical role to play in the response to the chronic disease burden facing the ACT and Capital Region.

A **high quality research base** underpinning the Nursing and Allied Health workforce enhances patient care through greater use of evidence-based practices, has the potential to reduce costs, enhance higher levels of job satisfaction and increase staff retention rates.

Mechanisms for mentoring nursing and allied health staff interested in research development are substantially limited by staff time release capacity and minimal access to staff with appropriate research experience.

Allied Health staff are located across a number of different areas (both institutional and geographical) of ACT Health and Calvary Public Hospital this too acts as a barrier to research development. A majority of the nursing and allied health workforce is located at The Canberra Hospital. All units are under high demand for clinical



services resulting in little or no time to undertake research: research development is of low priority yet it should underpin all practice.

The Powell report on the “Strategic and Scientific Review of Research at the Canberra Hospital 2005” recommended the development of a “Virtual Institute” which would encompass all existing research groups (including existing medical and nursing research initiatives) as well as possible emerging initiatives such as an Allied Health Research Centre. This has not as yet been achieved.

The Research Centre for Nursing and Midwifery Practice (RCNMP) provides a focus of research development for a number of nursing research initiatives. It is a high profile centre for nursing and midwifery research recognised by the International Council of Nurses. However, for some considerable time the RCNMP has been awaiting the appointment of a continuing Director which substantially inhibits capacity for significant forward planning in this area. The lack of momentum in filling this critical position reflects a low priority for research support in this area.

In summary, achieving a strong culture of active research underpinning the Nursing and Allied Health workforce in the ACT is a worthwhile goal that requires continued active input from ACT Health and the ACT universities.

Current nursing and allied health research support initiatives:

A **pilot research mentoring program for allied health staff** has been undertaken in the ACT supported by the ACT Health and Medical Research Council and the Faculty of Health at the University of Canberra in 2007-2008. This program has received strong support from ACT Health Human Relations and Workforce Planning which has been a critical enabling factor in undertaking this feasibility study.

Universities have implemented a range of strategies internally to support their academic staff developing research potential, however, a review of the literature was not able to uncover evidence for this being undertaken as an area health or as regional initiative. The development of the **research mentoring program for allied health staff** with a multidisciplinary and regional focus is an exciting new initiative in the health and medical research field and is a model for other jurisdictions.

The research mentoring program provides an opportunity for allied health staff in the ACT and region to develop and enhance their research skills and is currently undergoing evaluation with a view to extending this program format across the nursing and medical disciplines.

**Faculty of Health**

The University of Canberra has continued to contribute to capacity building to support nursing and allied health research in the region. In particular, the University of Canberra underwent a restructure in 2007 resulting in the formation of a new Faculty of Health which has the capacity to significantly enhance research support to the nursing and allied health areas. Part of this restructure sees the development of much closer ties to the Healthpact Research Centre for Health Promotion and Wellbeing which further enhances the critical mass for research development and links qualitative and quantitative research capacity in nursing and allied health.

The University of Canberra, Faculty of Health incorporates the disciplines of Pharmacy, Clinical Psychology, Nursing, Sports Studies, Nutrition and Dietetics and Physiotherapy with Exercise Science being offered in 2009. The Faculty of Health is also currently assessing the viability of adding further allied health discipline areas in 2010.

Actions needed:

- 1 The Powell report recommendation to establish a “Virtual Institute of Health” be carried forward to strengthen interdisciplinary research linkages between medicine, nursing and allied health.
- 2 The Powell report recommendation to establish an Allied Health Research Centre jointly supported through the Faculty of Health at the University of Canberra and ACT Health at the Canberra Hospital be carried out.
- 3 The ongoing position of Director of the Research Centre for Nursing and Midwifery Practice needs to be resolved as quickly as possible.
- 4 It would make good logistic and research development sense to collocate the Allied Health Research Centre with the existing Research Centre for Nursing and Midwifery Practice.
- 5 That structured and non-structured mentoring programs in research skills be made available to nursing and allied health staff of ACT Health through a strategic partnership with the Faculty of Health at the University of Canberra.

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