

## Position Statement Primary Health Care Workforce



### AAPCH Position

The Australian Association of Parenting and Child Health (AAPCH) firmly believes that the effectiveness of early childhood intervention and parenting support programs are directly aligned with the educational preparation and demonstrated competence of a multidisciplinary primary health care workforce.

As staunch proponents of the Declaration of Alma Ata <sup>(1)</sup> and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion <sup>(2)</sup> and as principal primary health care service providers for parenting and child health in Australia, AAPCH is committed to optimising children's physical health and well being and their emotional, social and intellectual development in accordance with the early years research <sup>(3, 5, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9)</sup>.

### Background

The early years research that has largely emanated from health, developmental psychology, neuroscience, education and criminology disciplines has provided unequivocal evidence of the relationship between the experiences of early childhood and the impact upon a persons health, well being and coping abilities across the life continuum <sup>(4)</sup> Importantly, this research has further illustrated the benefit of positive parenting and early intervention programs for young children and their primary carers in optimising their health and wellbeing outcomes.

To ensure the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of early childhood intervention and parenting programs in protecting and optimally promoting the future generations of Australia's children, AAPCH draws attention to a number of issues that require urgent redress. In particular, AAPCH highlights the current and future projected problems that limit the effectiveness and efficiency of primary health care services to meet the needs of the Australian community that support them in leading socially and economically productive lives; an issue repeatedly raised by professional and community advocates alike <sup>(10, 11, 12)</sup>. Given the predisposition for a sickness model of health care in Australia, these issues include the void that exists in public health policy for early childhood health, wellbeing and development and matters of primary health care workforce sustainability that include educational preparation and professional competence.

It is thirty years since the goal of universal access to health services was enshrined by the WHO in the declaration of Alma Ata in its strategy of health for all <sup>(1)</sup>. In that time, it has become overwhelmingly apparent that acute care based, curative approaches to health care cannot meet identified early intervention health and developmental needs of young children <sup>(7)</sup>. Despite the evidence, recent AIHW reports have revealed that the health expenditure for Australia in 2005-06 reached \$87 billion <sup>(13)</sup> of which only \$1,468 million was expended on public health activities <sup>(14)</sup>.

If the Australian government is serious about investing to ensure the nations strategic future as healthy, prosperous and sustainable, every effort must be made to reap the proven benefits of a healthy, well adjusted society across the life continuum that can be achieved through policy commitment to a primary health care model of practice. As a national entity of member organisations the AAPCH exists to participate and have input into policies and services affecting positive outcomes for families of young children. AAPCH acknowledges the work of AIHW in establishing national indicators of children's health, wellbeing and development <sup>(15)</sup> whilst recognising the significance of the above issues to the future of Australia's children.

AAPCH urges the Commonwealth Government to establish early childhood health, wellbeing and development as a policy priority of its targeted prevention programs that extend beyond the current

narrow realm of primary care by general practice. In so doing, AAPCH reaffirms its commitment to the WHO principles and practices of primary health care seeking to embed the philosophy within a new strategic national policy framework for child health, development and wellbeing.

AAPCH further recognises that specialist maternal and child health nurses and midwives provide a large and vital component of the primary health care and early intervention workforce. AAPCH further realises the global and national shortages of nurses and midwives (16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 11, 24) and the impost upon educational preparation and service delivery, most especially in the specialist area of maternal, child and family health.

AAPCH seeks recognition that to enact the health and wellbeing outcomes for children through early intervention and parenting programs requires a sustainable workforce that is educationally prepared in and holds demonstrated competence in primary health care principles and practices appropriate to the context. Whilst AAPCH acknowledges the current government initiatives to return nurses to the workforce, it further urges the commonwealth to redress the long standing causative system factors and conditions responsible for the exodus. Simply attempting to returning numbers of nurses to the health workforce who are not educationally prepared for the specialist scope of practice and whose duration in the workforce is limited will not provide a sustainable resolution to this significant problem.

AAPCH urges Australian Governments to commit to educationally preparing enough nurses, midwives and other health care workers to meet the projected primary health care needs of the Australian community into the future. The reliance on skilled migration from other developed and developing nations is not sustainable and ethically questionable in relation to the consequences it bears on developing countries.

In workforce terms, AAPCH applauds the COAG reform agenda of national regulation and accreditation for the health professions (25, 26). In so doing, AAPCH takes the opportunity to highlight the eminent suitability of the nurse practitioner role for inclusion within its multidisciplinary primary health care team, endorsing a finding of the Productivity Commission's recent review into Australia's health workforce (24).

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