



THE ACT DISABILITY SECTOR AND THE GP TASKFORCE

A National Disability Services (ACT Division) Response

Background and Issues

ACT Health has issued a document, “**Issues and Challenges for General Practice and Primary Health Care – A Discussion Paper**”, in relation to the focus and strategic agenda for the GP Taskforce, which was established to investigate access to primary health care in the ACT.

- The GP Taskforce paper has been published to invite input to the process, with comments due to the GP Taskforce by 31 July 2009.

NDS ACT has an interest in this important initiative from the perspective of seeking to ensure that appropriate communication and linkages exist between primary health care providers and ACT disability service providers. NDS ACT is also conscious that the workforce issues faced by the disability sector may inform and be informed by the issues and options relating to the GP sector.

- This document provides a summary of the issues raised in the GP Taskforce Discussion Paper which may be of interest to NDS ACT members.
- This document also provides a response to issues of direct interest to NDS ACT for the consideration of the GP Taskforce.

Key Points

The GP Taskforce Discussion Paper offers a number of issues for discussion and feedback, including:

- Options and innovations to improve access to primary health care services in the ACT, including opportunities that many arise in the Commonwealth-State and Territory health reform agenda
- Legislative options to protect the rights of patients and the health workforce
- Workforce demands and training issues in primary health care and
- Ways to improve access to primary health care services for vulnerable populations, including the aged, people with mental illness and the isolated.

NDS ACT is keen to see the needs of people with disability directly included as a consideration when developing ways to improve access to services.

The close working relationship between GPs and other health professionals in the community depending on the needs of their patients is acknowledged in the paper. The recent trends to service delivery models which encompass a range of co-located services, different models for appointments and access and billing management is discussed. With the increase in utilisation of practice nurses in many general practices, the capacity of people in that role is a critical consideration.

NDS ACT would like to see practice nurses given the ongoing opportunity for appropriate training in matters of relevance to effectively engaging with patients with disability including the often complex challenges facing people with multiple disability and people who may also have a mental illness.

The discussion paper notes a need for the equivalent of 74 additional full time GPs to reach the national average of GPs per head of population.

NDS ACT notes that this is clearly a long term challenge and, in the interim, would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Taskforce to find ways of ensuring that ready access to information on services for people with disability is possible for the existing GP population in Canberra.

The ACT Government has provided funding for four years to provide for a part-time GP Marketing and Support Advisor to coordinate recruitment support for GPs and their potential employees.

NDS ACT would welcome the opportunity to work with this position to share learnings and leverage from the work of each other as the workforce challenges share some synergies across the two sectors.

The discussion paper refers to the community sector support provided to “support, supplement and enhance primary care”, including:

- volunteer transport,
- counselling and referral services and
- emotional support, information and formal education and training for improved self management

The document goes on to specifically note:

“Several community based services offer support by means of transport, respite and activities for vulnerable groups. Condition based and self-help groups offer a range of information and support towards self-management. This sector, often making effective use of volunteers has capacity, if appropriately funded, support [sic] primary care in the community and can be quickly mobilised.”

NDS ACT notes that many of these services are provided by NDS ACT member organisations and, as such, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss the extent of this at present, potential for future capacity to expand and how supplementary services would work with existing support provided.

The discussion paper notes the importance of evaluating existing models and identifying the positives and negatives before disregarding them in favour of new models. Stating the need for rigorous action based research methodology, the paper identifies a strong focus on ensuring that interventions are implemented appropriately and with due consideration to ensuring that any changes made to general practice and primary care positively impact on quality or health outcomes.

- The ACT Budget includes an initiative funded at \$12.2m to support existing GPs to service residents of aged care facilities and elderly people at home by providing an in hours locum service.

NDS ACT believes that this model of support is worthy of consideration for broader application to other vulnerable groups requiring supported accommodation, including people with disability.

Care coordination and the benefits of primary health care networks are both raised as contributing to a growing coordination burden for the general practice sector. With general practice nurses taking much of the responsibility for patient care coordination, and with the number of such nurse practitioners increasing by 59% between 2005 and 2007, this aspect of workforce education and training is clearly critical.

Wider communication and information flow challenges are flagged as a feature for attention as part of development of an e-health environment, which is also a national priority.

Case management is an important issue and appropriate systems based recording of client information is critical. NDS ACT notes the findings of the ACT Auditor General in relation to its recent audit of ACT Government Respite Care and suggests that the disability sector be factored in to the development of any IT solutions.

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