

Tuesday, 11 May 2021

CELEBRATING THE UNSUNG HEROES OF AUSTRALIA'S HEALTHCARE SYSTEM ON INTERNATIONAL NURSES DAY

This International Nurses Day, RCSA is heralding Australia's agency nurses and celebrating the vital role they play in ensuring the stability and reliability of our health and care system.

RCSA CEO Charles Cameron said that the events of last year shone a spotlight on the importance of – and our reliance on – our exceptional agency nurses.

“It is rare to see the agency and temporary nursing workforce acknowledged specifically, or positively, for the unique and essential role they play. This International Nurses Day, RCSA is keen to ‘lift the veil’ on the role of agency nurses, who we believe are the unsung heroes of Australia's healthcare system,” said Charles.

“Agency nurses were the backbone of Australia's response to Covid. It was only because we have access to tens of thousands of qualified, experienced and ‘work ready’ on-hire nurses that we were able to effectively meet surge workforce demand, filling gaps when health workers were forced to isolate or quarantine, providing additional staff to support heightened infection control measures, and of course, rolling out vital community health initiatives such as COVID testing and vaccination programmes.”

Charles said that agency nurses fill a void that can't be met by permanent nursing staff.

“The reality is, permanent staff can't fill staffing gaps or address surge work needs seamlessly. Without agency nurses, Australia would be unable to meet surge nursing needs while unanticipated community health initiatives, such as we have seen implemented in COVID testing and vaccination in the past year, would have to draw upon permanent staffing resources in other parts of the health system, which has significant implications for care delivery,” he said.

“The fact is that from aged care to critical care, agency nurses are the oil that keeps the machinery of Australia's health system running. They play a vital supplementary role to permanent staff, making sure patient care can continue if workers get sick or take leave, or if there are surge demands on the system.”

Charles said it was disappointing that some public figures chose to criticise mobility in the health workforce during covid and cast a shadow over the vital work being performed by agency nurses.

“It made me so sad that at a time agency nurses were working harder than ever to close huge gaps in care and deliver vital Covid-related community health programs, some public figures were quick to label agency, mobile and casual nursing workforces as a challenge to disease containment and to leverage the dreadful situation we were in as an opportunity try to negatively influence community perceptions around that way of working,” he said.

“It's so easy to throw stones... I wonder how those same people believe we would have had any chance of meeting surge workforce needs in aged care, health, testing and vaccine delivery over the last 12 months without those workers.

“It is concerning to think about what might happen to Australia’s health and care system if petty ideological campaigns against agency and mobile workers in health were to be successful. Without agency nurses for example, Australia’s capability to respond to COVID 19 would have been completely undermined, with dire outcomes for patients and the community.”

“I’m taking today to put on the record how incredibly grateful Australia should be that those agency nurses were around and able to support continuity of care for patients across our health and aged care systems in an extraordinarily challenging year.”

Charles pointed out that the nature of agency nursing adds enormous value and skill to our health workforce.

“Agency nurses bring with them additional and different skills that complement those in place in permanent nursing workforces. The diverse and varied nature of working across different placements, whether it be a new unit, ward or facility, means agency nurses are exposed to different processes, systems and ways of working and are highly responsive and adaptive to different work cultures and way of doing things.”

Charles said the reason Australia has such great access to a robust and skilled agency nursing workforce was because so many nurses were attracted to agency as a way of working.

“We know that working through an agency is the preferred option for a large number of nurses because it allows them to accept or reject shifts as required to manage their time around other commitments,” he said.

“Agency nurses can elect to work in certain workplaces, and not in others. Agency work allows nurses to stay connected with work as they transition to retirement. Put simply, it provides much greater capacity for many people to achieve a more personally cohesive work/life balance.”

“The inflexible nature of permanent employment makes it less attractive for some, particularly those with young families or other caring commitments. People working through agencies tell us they love the flexibility it provides them to fit their work around their life, as opposed to trying to squeeze life around work.”

This feedback is echoed by Anna, a critical care nurse who works for RCSA Member staffing firm, iNurse, who said her permanent job was too difficult for her to manage with three young children at home.

“I found it hard to manage work as a permanent employee at a hospital after having the children. It was tough to change shifts when something did come up at home or at school. I also found it challenging to find care for my children when both my husband and I were working during the day,” Anna explained.

“Moving to iNurse four years ago was the best decision I could have made for myself and my family. I choose to work night shifts, and only in hospitals that are close to me as I don’t drive. This means that I can be home during the day with my children while my husband works, and at night I can go to work.

Media Release



“Justin and Debra Mackellin who established the business are nurses too. Working for them, I feel supported. They appreciate just how hard the work that we are doing can be and understand the need for flexibility in this profession,” she said.

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