



Nursing Review January, 2011

Page: 3
Section: General News
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 18369
Type: Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 252.75 sq.cms.



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Minimum qualifications needed

by Annie May

Patients in community care are at risk of neglect and abuse as a result of no mandatory minimum qualifications for assistants in nursing.

This is according to a CEO of a NSW nursing agency and college, who said as this group of carers continued to increase, so too, did that risk.

The proportion of registered nurses working in community care had declined over the last decade, however more focus was being placed on keeping people out of hospitals and facilities and in their homes, said Mary Casey, CEO of Casey Centre.

"About 10 years ago it was all RNs in the community but now they only make up about five per cent of the workforce," she said.

"We've found AINs are in greater demand in the community than are RNs, and are continuously being upskilled to perform more duties in community care previously performed by RNs.

"This means that patients in the community could very likely be cared for by unqualified nurses. It leaves many patients vulnerable – perhaps even to the point of neglect and abuse."

The issue, Casey said, is that the minimum mandatory qualifications

for RNs and Enrolled Nurses (ENs) have been set by the registering bodies, but they have not been set for AINs.

"There is no law that they have to be trained. I'm sure that many, particularly those who have been in nursing for many years, are very skilled and competent, but problems arise when someone comes in off the street with no experience and says I was to be an AIN," she said.

The lack of mandatory qualifications for AINs has been a concern of the nursing profession for some time now, with the Royal College of Nursing, Australia calling on the Productivity Commission to address the issue in its review of the aged care industry.

"In order to protect the health and safety of the public, it is essential to ensure that unlicensed workers are appropriately trained and skilled to undertake tasks associated with supporting nursing care," Debra Cerasa, RCNA CEO, told *Nursing Review*.

"It is about making sure they have the basic skills and basic competence to do the job. That isn't happening at the moment."

The ANF has also stated that AINs must be licensed in accordance with the Australian Health Professionals Regulation Agency (AHPRA) regulations and

are accountable for a determined scope of practice according to their licensure.

While believing it was an issue the government needed to address, Casey said employers also had a responsibility to change policy.

"For me, in my role as CEO of an agency, I can't send people out without being properly trained. The risk of something bad happening is too high," she said.

AINs employed by the Casey Centre have to have a minimum qualification of Certificate III. The centre also provides this training through its own college.

Other agencies also require similar minimum qualifications, but as there is no governing body to ensure this happens, nursing assistants from other agencies do not always receive adequate training.

"If an agency gets a half a million dollar a year offer, they are not going to want to knock it back because of lack of staff. It then becomes very tempting to use untrained AINs. And as there is no law against this they technically aren't doing anything wrong. At least not legally," Casey said.

"Introducing mandatory qualifications means these situations will no longer exist and the level of care will be raised across the board."