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## Election health policy announcements pointless until workforce shortages are addressed

The Australian Private Hospitals Association (APHA) has called for the major parties to make fixing the health workforce shortage their number one health policy priority for the upcoming Federal Election.

APHA CEO Michael Roff said the single biggest challenge facing health care in Australia is the shortage of health care professionals. The extent of the shortage is huge and so far, neither major party has put forward a clear plan to fix it.

“With no skilled migration for two years due to international travel restrictions and a workforce fatigued from the stress of managing COVID-19, the health care system is struggling to meet demand. Any health policy announcements made during the election campaign will be meaningless without a plan to immediately fix the health workforce shortages.

“We are facing large backlogs in essential surgery across both public and private hospitals, and without skilled migration to address the immediate shortage, Australians will be forced to wait longer, with ever decreasing quality of life, to get the surgery they need.”

He said the shortfall of nurses in the private hospital sector is significant.

“It’s estimated that the current shortfall is around 5,500 nurses. The sector urgently needs at least 1,000 skilled migrant nurses, and that is just for private hospitals.

“We also know there will be increased demand for registered nurses in aged care. Everyone supports more nurses in aged care, but unless these shortages are addressed, neither hospitals nor aged care will have a sustainable workforce.”

Mr Roff said the APHA was calling on both major parties to adopt three short-term measures to address the immediate nursing shortage.

“Firstly, a new Government must reduce the red tape and cost to employers of sponsoring health professionals as skilled migrants, so we are calling for a 12-month moratorium on charges to employers for health care-related skilled migration.

“Secondly we need a relaxation of onerous visa conditions to allow greater flexibility in how skilled migrant health workers can work in line with their qualifications.



“Finally, reinstating a pathway to permanent residency will provide an added incentive to move to Australia for a workforce in high global demand and ensure investments in this workforce by both government and employers are not lost to Australia,” he said.

Mr Roff said medium-term strategies to build the health care workforce should look closer to home in fast-tracking training for students and early career professionals; taking advantage of the training opportunities available in the private sector and making it easier and affordable for people to train to re-enter the health workforce.

“To address longer term issues Australia must have a National Health Workforce Plan and we call on both major parties to commit to develop such a plan. While a comprehensive plan will take time to complete, this work must begin and be resourced as a matter of urgency.

“Private hospitals played a big role in the pandemic response and will continue to help train Australia’s future health workforce. However, the scale of health work force shortage has now reached a level that will require the immediate attention of an incoming Government,” he said.

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