

Professions Reference Group Communiqué

The Professions Reference Group (PRG) met via video conference on Thursday 4 June 2020.

The meeting was chaired by Nello Marino from the Australian Podiatry Association.

Ahpra update

Ahpra's CEO Martin Fletcher informed the members.

- The published data by professions on the [pandemic sub-register](#) is regularly updated on the website. As at 26 May 2020, there are 35,198 practitioners on the sub-register and numbers have remained fairly stable. It has been discussed at the meeting with jurisdictions that, while there has been minimal reported demand for practitioners on the sub-register due to public health measures, the sub-register has been useful for targeted areas such as bolstering the workforce in public health and assisting recruitment in non-COVID-19 context where there may have been a knock-on impact from the pandemic. Jurisdictions are also paying close attention to the potential mental health impact of the pandemic restrictions and what may be required to support this area of the health system in the future. Phase 3 work on the sub-register to add Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners is being discussed with jurisdictions.
- The nursing and midwifery renewal period has ended and is now in the late period. About 94.5% nurses and midwives have renewed with a similar pattern to previous years although slightly down. Some technical issues at the end of the period were associated with national infrastructure IT and banking interface matters. Those who have had a difficulty around these issues have been addressed on a case-to-case basis and were not required to pay the usual additional late fee. A total of 179 financial hardship applications were received.
- The review by National Health Practitioner Ombudsman and Privacy Commissioner on confidentiality protections, including the recommendations from the review and our response to the recommendations is due to be published next week. The review report is helpful and thorough. Ahpra will accept all recommendations, including making a more active assessment of confidentiality for notifiers, making privacy policy and data collection statements, staff guidance and training improvements, database updates, improving consistency of communications and improving the framework on vexatious notifications, which has been an ongoing process. The review also recommended Ahpra seek legislative amendments to the National Law, in line with New South Wales and Queensland provisions, to make it an offence to harm, threaten, intimidate, harass or coerce a notifier.
- On vexatious complaints, the Ombudsman has also recommended Ahpra continue its focus on developing a clear framework for vexatious complaints, which can inform staff training for and decision-making.
- A review of the approach to allegations of sexual misconduct including chaperone conditions undertaken by Professor Ron Patterson three years ago recommended that we discontinue using these conditions as they did not protect the public as intended and were out of step with community expectations. We have since asked Prof Patterson to come back and assess our implementation of his recommendations and we will publish his review and our response. The overall report provides positive feedback on how we have implemented his recommendations and some suggestions for how we can progress further in the future. Its primary focus is in medicine, but we will study how this can be applied across all professions in the National Scheme.
- An internal review of the graduate registration period has now been completed with 29,094 applications received from October to March which is 12% more than the previous year. There was a 15.8% response rate and of those 80% reported a positive experience of the application process. Positive areas of performance included: average time of 10 days (down from 19 days the previous

year) to finalise an application from the time it became complete (usually when the graduate list is received), and average time of 42 days (down from 61 days in the previous year) to finalise from date of receipt of the application. Areas where improvements can be made included: certification of identity documents, evidence of English language skills registration standard, and ability to contact the case officer and get meaningful progress updates. These results including a profession-specific breakdown of the survey responses will be provided to National Boards.

- Ahpra is currently gearing up for the mid-year graduate period, this is only for a small number of professions, but is expected to peak over the next few months. There won't be an extension of relaxed arrangements for the certification of photographic identity documents, so full, correct certification will be required. Updated communications materials with information on requirements for graduates applying for registration will be made available in the coming months.
- It was clarified that there has been a need to try and understand the impact of COVID-19 on clinical placements required for completion of qualifications this year, especially for the osteopathy profession which will have a mid-year cohort for the first time. At this stage, it seems that, for most of the programs expecting to graduate mid-year, there will be minimal impact and the same number of applicants expected.
- A proposal to cease the use of hard copy registration certificates (when a person registers initially and upon renewal) has been sent to National Boards for approval. This proposition follows the lead of the Paramedicine, and Nursing and Midwifery Boards who implemented this last year. Should the Boards endorse this proposal, the aim is to implement this plan from the next renewal cycles (September for the Medical Board and November for the other professions). Practitioners will still be able to print off their own copy of certificates online.

Update on the implementation of the policy directions issued by the (COAG) Health Council

Ahpra's National Director, Engagement and Government Relations Nick Lord updated members.

- The first two policy directions issued by the Health Council in January 2020 are both now in effect, these are:
 - PD 2019-1 Paramourty of public protection when administering the National Scheme, and
 - PD 2019-2 Requirements to consult with patient safety bodies and health care consumer bodies on every new and revised registration stand, code or guidelines.
- Mr Lord gave an update on PD 2019-1 including disclosures authorised in the policy directions, information about the progress on implementing the first policy direction, and seeking any feedback on questions the paper may raise. He will send out an information paper to members after the meeting.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been some some delays in working up an amendment bill for Tranche 2. The timeframe has not been finalised.

Advertising guidelines

Ahpra National Director, Policy and Accreditation Helen Townley and Manager, Strategic Policy Jaclyn Kennedy spoke about the review of the Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service.

- The paper outlined the proposed approach to testing the revised guidelines with practitioners for readability and clarity of key messages prior to finalising the guidelines for publication. Members were provided an opportunity to nominate practitioners to help test the revised advertising guidelines. The testing is seeking to check that practitioners find the revised guidelines clear and helpful for understanding the advertising requirements of the National Law.

- Members also discussed how practical examples for professions can be used to support resources on advertising correctly. Through practitioner testing, Ahpra is keen to identify topics within the advertising requirements which may benefit from some additional guidance.

Other business

- The members have agreed to proceed with the 16 July scheduled meeting, and to review the subsequent special meeting schedules that follow. Unless there's any dramatic change in circumstances the plan is to return to the regular quarterly meeting schedule on Wednesday 19 August 2020 (11am - 3pm).

Next meeting

- The next virtual meeting is scheduled for Thursday 16 July 2020 at 3 – 4pm.

Nello Marino

Chair
Professions Reference Group