

Professions Reference Group Communiqué

The Professions Reference Group (PRG) met via video conference on Thursday 26 March 2020.

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

Ahpra update

Ahpra updated members on various matters, including the following.

- The Perth office has recently been closed to the public with other office closures expected. Despite this Ahpra remains open for business and able to continue providing important services remotely while in-person services are temporarily suspended. Options for practitioners to provide documents without the need to present in person and the ability to upload forms online or email them are currently being finalised. These will be in place within the next few business days.
- Ahpra's objective to provide consistent and nationally-aligned communications to health practitioners can be challenging but work continues through regular meetings with jurisdictions. It is also helpful to stay in touch with and learn from international regulators including the UK, USA and New Zealand.
- Ahpra will continue to focus its regulatory approach on supporting priority workforce needs and its own business continuity for regulatory functions.

Regulatory response to COVID-19: Regulatory policy and operations

Ahpra Executive Director, Regulatory Operations Kym Ayscough and Ahpra National Director, Accreditation and Policy Helen Townley provided an update to members.

- Registration teams have just handled the graduate campaign peak and a post-campaign report is expected in April to plan for the next peak period. It was noted that several thousand more applications were received during this campaign than expected. There has also been a late surge in applications which may be attributed to graduates foregoing their holiday plans due to COVID 19. The next renewal period is being prepared for nursing and midwifery.
- In response to the present COVID-19 situation Registration and Customer Service staff were quickly moved to work safely from home to focus on registration assessments for priority professions (as identified by jurisdictions) namely medical, nursing and midwifery, paramedicine and pharmacy. For internationally qualified applicants, priority is being given to those who are already in Australia, given travel restrictions in force.
- Notifications timeframes may be affected as most courts and tribunals have deferred hearings. Practitioners will be updated as we obtain further information, and they will be informed via email and/or through their legal representatives. For practitioners with compliance matters, they are advised to continue with their testing procedures (e.g. drug testing).
- Ahpra has created a project team to function as a clearing house for all COVID-19 related regulatory policy queries through which each question received is carefully addressed to develop a general information and made available to stakeholders. Some of the questions raised by PRG members included first-aid trainings, recency of practice, continuing professional development (CPD), supervision requirements and scheduled exams. For more details members can refer to the Ahpra webpage on [COVID-19 queries](#) which contains updated information.

Regulatory response to COVID-19: Coordination and communications

Ahpra Executive Director, Strategy and Policy Chris Robertson, together with Ahpra National Director, Engagement and Government Relations Nick Lord, Ahpra National Director, Communications Anita Rivera

and Ahpra National Coordinator and Queensland State Manager Heather Edwards updated members on Ahpra's general approach to the current environment.

- Ahpra and the National Boards are prepared for a coordinated response to provide timely, consistent and appropriate regulatory policy advice and responses to Commonwealth, state and territory governments, health services, practitioners and professional groups, education providers, accreditation authorities and other stakeholders.
- Ahpra has created the *Pandemic response sub-register* (sub-register) for any qualified practitioner in the priority professions (as identified by jurisdictions) who has moved from practising to non-practising in the last three years or who has removed themselves from the register (i.e. not taken off for other reasons). These practitioners will be added to the sub-register without a need for application, nor fee. They will be temporarily registered for the period of the emergency response only. Work to sort the details and obtain approval from the Boards is ongoing to make the sub-register available by Monday 6 April.
- Ahpra is conscious of their responsibility to deliver consistent messaging through i) shared understanding of extraordinary circumstance and approach, ii) messages to practitioners on behalf of the government and Boards, and iii) identifying ways to make regulation as effective as possible. Social media, the website and emails will be key channels for communication.

Other business

There were no other items raised for discussion.

Next meeting

The members agreed to a special one-hour meeting every fortnight beginning 9 April 2020 during this pandemic.

Nello Marino

Chair
Professions Reference Group