

Professions Reference Group Communiqué

The Professions Reference Group (PRG) met via video conference on Thursday 14 May 2020.

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

Ahpra update

Ahpra's CEO Martin Fletcher informed the members.

- Ahpra is shifting its focus on COVID19 response to recovery and gradual re-opening of offices now that restrictions are being lifted with continued progress in flattening the curve. Planning for the re-opening of some offices may come in a different form given social distancing requirements and at a different pace due to the differing arrangements in each state and territory. The Perth office is likely to be first to re-open, though a number of staff will continue to work from home due to social distancing requirements. Staff have also found benefits in remote working and Ahpra is looking at how we continue to support that moving forward. Boards and Committees will continue to meet virtually under ongoing travel restrictions.
- The ['Taking Care' podcast series](#) has recently added three episodes relating to COVID-19 topics including the sub-register, telehealth and practitioner wellbeing. The podcast is a good way to initiate a dialogue and engage with practitioners and the community on issues that are vital to health care and the work of registered health practitioners. The podcast is currently getting good pick-up and promotion via social media. PRG members are invited to contribute ideas for future topics and suggestions on how to share the message about the podcast.
- Ahpra appeared recently before a Queensland Parliamentary Committee with responsibility for looking at how the complaints management system works in Queensland involving the work of the Office of the Health Ombudsman (OHO), Ahpra and the National Boards. The arrangement with OHO is collaborative, productive and working well. There will soon be a joint consideration mechanism introduced in Queensland to make sure that a notification is better able to be dealt with by the appropriate body. Ongoing works continue as an IT solution and support for the program are put in place followed by an agreed start date.
- A review by Professor Ron Paterson of the work done to review the approach to sexual boundary violations (focused primarily in medicine) is close to completion. Once finished the report will be published and shared with the PRG.

Regulatory response to COVID-19: Regulatory policy and operations

Ahpra's Executive Director, Regulatory Operations Kym Ayscough provided an update to members.

- The pandemic sub-register now has 35,276 practitioners on it (21,977 nurses and 2,987 midwives) with 12,270 having opted out. Three hundred fifty practitioners have recently been added from Phase 2 professions who had current registration in other professions as well as having previous registration in those added in Phase 2. The [pandemic sub-register data](#) is updated periodically and published in the Ahpra website.
- There have been more than 1,600 queries answered through the special email address for those on the sub-register.
- Ahpra is currently looking into potentially adding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Practitioners on to the sub-register via an opt-in process.
- So far there has been minimal reported demand from jurisdictions for practitioners on the sub-register to work due to the success of public health measures. There is planning underway for pathways off the sub-register for those who may wish to move from the temporary register back to

ongoing registration after the pandemic emergency period as Ahpra does not expect to renew registration for people on the sub-register. If practitioners wish to return to continuing registration, they will need to apply and meet registration requirements.

- Return to business-as-usual includes planning for the mid-year graduate registration period and at the very preliminary stages of planning for the end-of-year graduate period. A review of the previous year included a first-time survey of graduate applicants about their experience of the registration process. The survey responses are being processed to provide profession-specific reports to the National Boards. This information will then be published.
- While there is historical data about application patterns, the impacts of COVID-19 particularly on clinical placement and on timings for graduation are uncertain, so the Registration and Accreditation teams are working closely with the Executive Officers of the National Boards to help inform efforts towards the mid-year year graduate registration period and preliminary stages of planning for the end-of-year graduation period.
- The nursing renewal campaign continues with the same pattern as shown in previous years. While the financial hardship plan was made available during this renewal period, it appears that people are finding a way to pay their fees, with less than fifty practitioners taking up the offer to date.

Regulatory response to COVID-19: Coordination and communications

Ahpra's Executive Director, Strategy and Policy Chris Robertson provided members with updates.

- Ahpra is working with jurisdictions to look at methods to evaluate the sub-register as part of the surge workforce requirements. Whether there is a need to design a specific survey that would ask them about their experience and what they have done, or have not done, is being assessed at this point. Further work will be completed over the next few months and outcomes shared with the PRG.
- In terms of broader communication, the Ahpra webpage on [Responding to COVID-19](#) has been revised and now gives people easier access to the frequently asked questions. Feedback on the webpage is welcome and it will be regularly updated as things change.
- In the next jurisdictional meeting Ahpra will follow-up on the need and model for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners to be added to the sub-register. Ahpra will provide an update on its progress.

National Boards consultation

Ahpra National Director, Policy and Accreditation Helen Townley spoke about the consultation processes.

- The National Boards consultation processes is undergoing an update for two reasons: i) ministers issued policy directions to the National Boards and Ahpra earlier this year requiring National Boards to consult with patient safety and consumer bodies on every new or revised registration standard code or guideline, and ii) to align the National Board consultation process, which was published some time ago, with more recent processes.
- Ahpra is looking to strengthen its focus on engaging with these bodies and build on current consultation practice and engagement with the PRG, the Community Reference Group, and jurisdictions. The current consultation process in place with professional associations and the opportunity for practitioners to contribute through public consultation will continue to be critically important to this work. Feedback collected will be incorporated to aid National Boards in implementing policy direction.

Other business

- Pharmacy Guild representative Claire Bekema shared with the group that they are dealing with concerns about the increased number of complaints against pharmacists for upholding the measures and dispensing limits that have been put in place during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Next meeting

The next virtual meeting is scheduled for Thursday 4 June 2020.

Nello Marino

Chair
Professions Reference Group