

Professions Reference Group Communiqué

The Professions Reference Group (PRG) met via video conference on Thursday 9 April 2020.

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

Ahpra update

Ahpra CEO Martin Fletcher updated members on various matters, including the following.

- Ahpra is now a virtual organisation as all offices are closed to the public but services continue to be available with all staff working from home. At this stage, these arrangements are planned for at least three months with ongoing support provided for staff to work safely and effectively.
- The pandemic sub-register, recently established as a response to jurisdictions and national priorities for a surge in workforce capacity, went live on the Ahpra website on 6 April 2020. The first tranche included medical, nursing, midwifery and pharmacy professions. Practitioners who previously held general or specialist registration and left the *Register of practitioners* or moved to non-practising registration in the past three years were emailed with a provision to opt out if they didn't want to be in the sub-register. So far around twenty-five percent (25%) have opted out.
- The pandemic sub-register will be in place for up to twelve months or less if the pandemic subsides. Practitioners will need indemnity insurance coverage before they can practise. In medicine and pharmacy, some indemnity organisations are offering free or low cost cover for practitioners in the pandemic sub-register. Jurisdictions have been advised to ensure that employers conduct appropriate employment hiring checks, and trainings before filling roles.
- Phase two is aimed to roll out on 20 April 2020 for physiotherapists, radiographers, and psychologists under similar arrangements for the first phase of the pandemic sub-register.
- The ongoing regular weekly meetings with jurisdictions are helpful as Ahpra addresses issues and discusses workforce priorities among the Commonwealth and state and territories.

Regulatory response to COVID-19: Regulatory policy and operations

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

- Process change for how overseas applicants can prove their identity at their place of employment rather than presenting in person at an Ahpra office appears to be working well. The only concern is when applicants, upon arrival in Australia, disregard self-isolation rules to present their final documents. Clearer instructions have since been released for self-isolation rules to be strictly observed.
- Financial hardship arrangements are currently being reviewed for the nurses and midwives' renewal. Planned procedure is via a self-assessment form which would allow for payment of registration fees in two instalments: first half, upon renewal, and the second half due in October 2020 this year.
- In response to a question, Ms Ayscough clarified that currently registered practitioners are not able to elect not to renew their registration and seek to join the sub-register. If a currently registered practitioner elects not to renew or to move to non-practising registration, and later decides they wish to return to practice, they will be required to submit a new application.
- Ahpra's COVID-19 webpage is updated regularly covering frequently asked questions about issues such as CPD and English language requirements. Members agreed that the updates are succinct and to the point.

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.

- The National Boards, accreditation authorities, Ahpra, and the Australian Government through the health and education portfolios, and other stakeholders are working together to finalise a public statement on principles for clinical education which aims to guide the decisions of professions, accreditation authorities, education providers and health services on student clinical education during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the safety of patient care is the overriding priority, student clinical education, including placements, is encouraged to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic where this is safe and possible.
- Racism in the form of denial of access to health services by health practitioners towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in particular have been reported. A public statement is being developed and will be released next week. Ahpra is also currently working with jurisdictions to identify and enable, whether it's by registration or other means, areas where health care or community support can be provided immediately, including the scope of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioners in isolated communities.
- Continued communications will be provided to registered health practitioners via regular updates on matters that are relevant to them.
- Practitioners are seeking guidance from Boards and Ahpra about a range of issues. It has been important to clarify that Ahpra and the National Boards are not in a position to give public health advice. This needs to come from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee.

Other business

There were no other items raised for discussion.

Next meeting

The next virtual meeting is scheduled for Thursday 23 April 2020.

Nello Marino

Chair
Professions Reference Group