



RESEARCH  
ADVOCACY  
CURE



# National Nursing Workforce Strategy

*Joint submission from MS Australia & MS  
Nurses Australasia*

**OCTOBER 2024**

## What is MS?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is the most commonly acquired neurological disease in younger adults around the world with over 2.8 million people affected. More than 33,300 Australians live with MS and over 7.6 million Australians know someone or have a loved one with this potentially debilitating disease.

Symptoms vary between people and can come and go; they can include severe pain, walking difficulties, debilitating fatigue, partial blindness and thinking and memory problems. For some, MS is characterised by periods of relapse and remission, while for others it has a progressive pattern of disability. MS robs people of quality of life, primarily driven by the impact of MS on pain, independent living, mental health and relationships.

## MS Australia

MS Australia is Australia's national multiple sclerosis (MS) not-for-profit organisation that empowers researchers to identify ways to treat, prevent and cure MS, seeks sustained and systemic policy change via advocacy, and acts as the national champion for Australia's community of people affected by MS.

MS Australia represents and collaborates with its state and territory MS Member Organisations, people with MS, their carers, families and friends and various national and international bodies to:

- Fund, coordinate, educate and advocate for MS research as part of the worldwide effort to solve MS
- Provide the latest evidence-based information and resources
- Help meet the needs of people affected by MS.

## MS Nurses Australasia

MS Nurses Australasia Inc (MSNA) is the peak body for MS Nurses in the Southern Hemisphere, providing education and support for MS nurses and other health care professionals in Australia and New Zealand.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) nurses are a subspecialty in neuroscience nursing and have become a dynamic group who have worked hard to ensure that high quality, evidence-based nursing care is promoted and delivered for all people diagnosed with MS.

MSNA strives to improve and support the MS nursing cohort through:

- Supporting strong formal and informal networking, peer support and mentorship opportunities for MS nurses
- Presenting an annual conference to showcase Australasian MS nurse research and practice developments
- Providing financial scholarship opportunities for MSNA members to support and encourage further development of the MS nurse skill set, nurse led research, support career development and to advance MS nursing practice in Australasia
- Keeping MS nurses updated on contemporary issues impacting people with MS to enhance their capacity to advocate for and support people with MS and work effectively within that person's health care team.

**Cover page:** MS Nurse Emma Christian with patient

# National Nursing Workforce Strategy

MS Australia and MS Nurses Australasia Inc (MSNA) welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the draft National Nursing Workforce Strategy. The focus of this submission is on Multiple Sclerosis (MS) nurses and MS nurse practitioners. MS Australia and MSNA are committed to expanding and improving access to MS nursing care for people living with MS.

## Recommendations

- MS Australia and MSNA recommend that the draft National Nursing Workforce Strategy be updated to include a priority to invest in and expand the specialist nursing workforce including:
  - ❖ Support for nurses to upskill/ undertake professional development to become specialist nurses
  - ❖ Improved employment conditions including ongoing and fully funded positions
  - ❖ Funding for mentorship, peer support and preceptorship programs
  - ❖ Education on the role and value of specialist nurses
  - ❖ Support for nurse-led clinics.

## Priorities

MS Australia and MSNA welcome the development of a National Nursing Strategy to provide a framework to shape the future direction of nursing in Australia. We support the four main priorities of the plan and acknowledge the extensive consultation and research that has contributed to the drafting of the Strategy. The following priorities are of particular importance to MS nursing:

- *1.1 Investment in nurse leadership* - formal and informal networking, peer support and mentorship and preceptorship are essential to ensure that we build the next generation of MS nurses and expand the capacity and skillset of the existing MS nursing workforce.
- *2.1 – 2.3 Workforce planning* – improved workforce planning will ensure that we have an adequate nursing workforce to meet the needs of the people living with MS across Australia, reduce burnout of the current workforce and allow for improved service delivery models and funding.
- *2.4 – 2.6 Nursing Education* – well funded, fit for purpose and evidence-based funding is crucial for specialist nurses, including MS nurses, to expand and improve their skills set and to support new nurses entering the sector.
- *3.2 – 3.4 Innovative models of care* – flexible and innovative models of care ensure that MS nursing care can be delivered to people wherever they live including those in regional, rural and remote locations. People living with progressive and fluctuating conditions such as MS also need a system that can react to their changing needs and levels of support.
- *3.5 Optimum Scope of Practice* – allowing MS nurses and MS nurse practitioners to work their full scope of practice has great benefits for people living with MS. Their extensive knowledge of MS including medications and therapies make them the best option to provide a range of health supports to people living with MS and can significantly improve Commonwealth savings<sup>1, 2</sup> as well as potentially increasing access to care in regional and remote areas. For further information on how to best support MS nurses and MS nurse practitioners to work their full scope of practice, please refer to the joint MS Australia/MSNA submission on the [Scope of Practice Review](#).

- *4.1 – 4.3 Retention* – specialist nursing can provide an attractive option for nurses facing burnout and looking to leave the profession as it provides more flexible working hours and family friendly conditions. Support to upskill into other roles including MS nursing would contribute significantly to the retention of the nursing workforce.
- *4.5 Build and grow nurse clinical-academic/research career pathways* – an important aspect of the MS nursing role is engagement in MS research including research management and clinical research trials; nursing research projects; advocating for and promoting research findings and supporting patients to engage with research including clinical trials.
- *4.6 Rural and remote workforce* – access to specialist nursing care is crucial for people living in rural and remote Australia, especially where access to Neurologists and specialist clinics is limited. The flexibility of MS nursing means that services can be provided to people in these regions through nurse led clinics and workshops and telephone/video appointments.

MS Australia and MSNA also strongly support priorities to improve the diversity of the nursing workforce, remove discrimination and make nursing a modern, valued and safe profession. We also support priorities that embrace new technologies and approaches and climate-ready healthcare.

## Specialist Nursing

The draft National Nursing Strategy does not reference specialist nurses or include any priorities for supporting specialist nurses and expanding the specialist nursing workforce.

Specialist nurses in Australia play a critical role in the healthcare system by providing expert, patient-centered care, which leads to improved health outcomes. Their specialised knowledge enables early interventions, better management of chronic conditions, and reduces hospital admissions, ultimately lowering healthcare costs. Any future strategy for the nursing workforce in Australia should include priorities to maintain, train and expand the specialist nursing workforce.

MS Nurses and MS Nurse Practitioners are an integral part of the multidisciplinary healthcare team of specialist healthcare professionals providing support, education, advice, and care for people with MS. Access to MS Nurse care brings health benefits for people with MS. These include lower disability level, slower self-reported disease progression, less severe symptoms, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and a higher quality of life.

The *MS Nurse Care in Australia Report*<sup>3</sup> by MS Australia, in collaboration with the Menzies Institute for Medical Research and MSNA found that one-third of Australians living with MS (equivalent to 8,000 people) do not have access to life-changing MS nurse care and have consistently worse health outcomes. MS Nurse care reduces the need for other, more costly health professionals, such as GPs and neurologists and prevents emergency department presentations and potentially, hospital admissions. It is a highly cost-effective model of care. The report found that it would cost \$5 million to employ an additional 50 MS Nurses for the 8,000 people with MS currently without access in Australia. Based on a conservative estimate of 10% costs savings, this could reduce the cost of their overall MS care by \$64.3 million annually.

Below are three examples of the wide-ranging roles that MS nurses cover:

### Case Study – Belinda

Belinda works in both a clinical role as a MS nurse and in research management, overseeing MS clinical trials at a Victorian hospital.

Belinda has been working with people living with MS for more than 15 years and supports them from the time of diagnosis and helps them to understand the unique complexities and challenges of MS. Belinda manages a team of MS nurses who provide support to people living with MS and specialist MS Nurse education through preceptorship programs for new MS Nurses and by helping them develop a broader understanding of MS care and clinical trials skills by providing training by observation in their large multidisciplinary clinic.

Belinda works closely with other services, general practice, local community, national and international partners.

As part of her role Belinda is actively engaged in MS research including management of the research program and oversight of clinical trials. Belinda has also been involved in research that explores the delivery and value of MS nurse care in Australia and is a co-author of the [MS Nurse Care in Australia Report](#).

### Case Study - Tim

Tim was one of the first MS Specialist Nurses and the first MS Nurse Practitioner in Australia. He works as a MS Nurse Practitioner across two Queensland hospitals with his MS nurse-led and patient-focused clinics.

Tim provides nursing services to patients from the time of diagnosis and across their life span and has worked with some patients for over 20 years. Tim works with nearly **1,000 MS patients** across two diverse hospital districts providing individualised care. He works with a range of other clinicians including Neurologists, GPs, nurses and allied health.

As a nurse practitioner Tim provides patients with a wide range of services including assessing, planning and treating MS symptoms, prescribing (some) symptomatic therapies and ordering pathology and some radiology.

Tim further contributes to the work of MS nurses through support, mentoring and education for other MS nurses and pioneering the development of web-based education for people living with MS.

### Case Study - Bridie

Bridie works as a MS Nurse Advisor within a community health and disability service provider. Bridie's role is diverse; however, her areas of specialisation are pain management, palliative care, continence management and carer support.

Bridie's role covers four Australian States and Territories with over **13,000 people** living with MS and their families, friends, and carers registered as part of the service. Bridie primarily conducts nursing consultations through a telehealth model of care, reactive to people's needs as they arise. This approach is designed to overcome various barriers to accessing health care, such as geographical distance, time constraints, and other inequities.

As part of the Nurse Advisory Service, Bridie's role involves supporting people in navigating the complexities of health care and disability systems within their local communities. This support includes education, coaching, and listening. Bridie also assists people when their health condition changes or deteriorates and helps them access the services they require. Additionally, she empowers people by improving their health literacy and self-efficacy, fosters connections within the health care and the broader community, links people to reliable information, and facilitates involvement in the latest research, including participation in clinical trials conducted at major MS centres.

Bridie provides care and services across an individual's MS journey, including the diagnosis stage, during MS relapses, when making decisions about MS treatment, managing MS symptoms, optimizing overall well-being and brain health, and planning for advanced stages of MS. Her nursing practices and activities are diverse and tailored to the specific needs of each person she assists.

Bridie's role also provides education to people with MS, community and disability service providers and health care professionals through various platforms, including webinars, podcasts, and event platforms.

If every Australian with MS had access to MS Nurse care as part of their ongoing MS management plan this would result in substantial cost savings for MS health care in Australia. It would significantly delay disease progression and contribute to an increased quality of life. There are further savings from a reduced reliance on disability, aged care and community supports.

We estimate there is currently a shortfall of 65 MS nurses across Australia. The current MS nursing workforce is further hindered by high patient caseloads, a declining workforce, increasing MS population, inconsistent funding models and poor employment conditions including lack of permanent and fully funded positions.

**MS Australia and MSNA recommend** that the draft National Nursing Workforce Strategy be updated to include a priority to invest in and expand the specialist nursing workforce including:

- Support for nurses to upskill/ undertake professional development to become specialist nurses
- Improved employment conditions including ongoing and fully funded positions
- Funding for mentorship, peer support and preceptorship programs
- Education on the role and value of specialist nurses
- Support for nurse-led clinics.

## Reference

<sup>1</sup> Oliver, G.M., Pennington, L., Reville, S. & Rantz, M. (2014) Impact of nurse practitioners on health outcomes of Medicare and Medicaid patients. *Nursing Outlook* 62(6):440-7.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, T., McNeil, K., Mitchell, R., Boyle, B. & Ries, N. (2019) A study of macro-, meso- and micro-barriers and enablers affecting extended scopes of practice: the case of rural nurse practitioners in Australia. *BMC Nursing*. 18(14)

<sup>3</sup> MS Australia, Menzies Institute for Medical Research & MS Nurses Australasia Inc (2022). *MS Nurse Care in Australia: Patterns of access and impact on health outcomes*. Retrieved from: <https://www.msaustralia.org.au/about-us/reports-and-financials/>

