

Hospital training for nurses is not the cure

Disgruntled workers need better pay and conditions, writes **Gerardine Kearney**.

THE \$170 million Prime Minister John Howard plans to spend on taking nursing back 20 years would be better spent on addressing the problems that have resulted in more than 30,000 nurses leaving the workforce in recent years.

Over the past 20 years, nurses have worked hard to shift nursing education into the university and TAFE sectors to improve the quality of care the public receives.

Australian nurses are internationally renowned for the quality of education we receive and the care we deliver.

For decades now research and evidence confirms tertiary education has led to better nursing care and reduced the risk of adverse outcomes for patients.

The detail of the Howard Government's plans to move enrolled nurse education back into the hospital system is fundamentally flawed as enrolled nurses already receive a high level of education and training in the tertiary system.

The real problems plaguing both the VET/TAFE sector for enrolled nurses, and the university sector for registered nurses, is a lack of adequate federal government funding.

Both would certainly benefit from a greater level of funding for infrastructure and increased clinical placements. The Australian Nursing Federation and the National Enrolled Nurses Association have been lobbying for more funding from the Howard Government for years, to no avail.

Nurses and nursing organisations could have given Mr Howard some good advice on how to address the nursing shortage had he bothered to consult them. It seems the Government is desperate to come up with plans to win over community support, but developing policies on



Digital doctoring by Chris Totterman.

the run in the lead-up to an election without proper consultation could see an enormous amount of public money being wasted.

If Mr Howard had asked nurses why they are leaving the profession in droves they might have told him it is because their working conditions and ability to offer a high level of patient care have been undermined by bad industrial relations legislation.

Nurses would have suggested the \$170 million he wants to spend could be directed towards improving nurses' pay and conditions and reducing their workloads.

As one of the peak bodies representing nurses nationwide, the nurses federation has launched a series of advertisements to highlight the appalling working conditions in aged care which have occurred as a direct result of the Howard

Government's industrial relations policies. These ads highlight the lack of decent jobs in the field of nursing care for older Australians. John Howard should turn his mind to resolving the serious problems affecting the aged-care industry.

WorkChoices will drive even more nurses from the profession. Improving nurses' wages and conditions and increasing the number of undergraduate nursing places is what the health system really needs.

The proposal reflects a worn-out government that is out of touch with the real needs of the Australian health system.

Mr Howard should ask himself and tell the community why we have more than 10 per cent of the nursing workforce (30,000 nurses) who remain registered as nurses, but refuse to work in a system that has

been run down and fails to provide decent wages and working conditions.

An immediate solution to the nursing shortage in this country would be to attract even half of those nurses back into the system by providing decent jobs, wages and working conditions.

Nursing education moved to the tertiary sector more than 20 years ago because of careful consideration of the educational needs of the profession and was supported by government, industry and nurses. Mr Howard cannot seriously believe that this election grab will be good for the health of the nation.

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Topics today



Today's fact

Touching plants makes them grow more healthy.

Today's word

Canard (ka-nah-d): A false story, report, or rumour; a hoax.

It happened today

From our files - 1963: A mongoose that escaped from a ship in Newcastle Harbour last week was shot by a policeman.

Today in history

1821: Independence is proclaimed for Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

1917: Russia is proclaimed a republic by Alexander Kerensky, head of a provisional government.

1935: Nuremberg laws outlaw Jews and make swastika official flag of Germany.

1972: Two former White House aides, Howard Hunt and Gordon Liddy, are added to the five men already charged with the break-in at the Watergate building.

1988: Convictions of Michael and Lindy Chamberlain over death of their baby Azaria at Ayers Rock are quashed.

1997: Thousands of Rwandans gather for Mass at the site of one of the century's worst genocides. The bones of as many as 60,000 Tutsis slain by the former Hutu government are put to rest.

2000: The Sydney Olympic Games officially open with the lighting of the Olympic flame by Cathy Freeman. The five stadium torch-bearers are all women - Betty Cuthbert in her wheelchair, Dawn Fraser, Shirley Strickland de la Hunty, Shane Gould and Debbie Flintoff-King.

Born today

James Fenimore Cooper, US writer (1789-1851); **Joseph Lyons**, Australian prime minister (1879-1939);

Agatha Christie, British author (1890-1976);

Brian Henderson, Australian television personality (1931-);

Oliver Stone, US filmmaker (1946-);

Tommy Lee Jones, US actor (1946-);

Sophie Dahl, pictured, British author and model (1979-);

Prince Harry of the United Kingdom (1984-).



Odd Spot

Revolymmer, a spin-off company from the University of Bristol, claims it has finally invented an easy-to-remove chewing gum.

Today's text

"Jesus said 'This then is what I commanded you; love one another'." **John 15:17**

Testing times for literacy and numeracy

Education departments are too concerned with the stigma of failure, says **Kirsten Story**.

LAST week was National Literacy and Numeracy Week, a time to recognise schools and individuals making a difference in literacy and numeracy education and to consider future opportunities for progress and reform.

A breakthrough in the past year has been the agreement between Commonwealth, state and territory governments to introduce a national literacy and numeracy testing regime to replace the state-administered regimes.

While this is a positive development that will finally allow accurate comparison between states and territories, there is still a long road ahead.

State and territory departments of education gain a multitude of information on individual students and schools from the testing. But

they refuse to share it and they allow our worst-achieving schools, disproportionately clustered in remote indigenous communities, to continue to post low achievement rates year after year.

With the exception of Western Australia, education departments do not publish information on how individual schools have performed. The Commonwealth reportedly asked the states for information about the individual performance of students and schools, but the states refused, arguing that identifying data could be used to punish poor-performing schools.

The controversy around "high stakes" testing - think of it as testing with consequences - is not confined to Australia. In the US, the contentious "No Child Left Behind" legislation is up for renewal and neither side of politics is rushing to hold failing schools to account.

Indeed, a scathing opinion piece in the *Washington Post* last week bemoaned a trend towards making excuses for failing public schools and reproached schools systems that boasted of overall achievement

while failing their poorest students.

It could have been talking about Australia. We score highly in the international Programme for International Student Assessment but in some of our worst-achieving schools few if any children pass the national minimum benchmarks for literacy and numeracy.

Our departments of education allow their concern about the stigma that might be attached to schools and students labelled as failing to override parents' right to know how their child's school is performing.

In NSW, for example, legislation prevents the publication of any school performance data. What is worse: that children can't read or write at grade level, or that other people know?

We can make all sorts of excuses for the low achievement of remote schools.

But the first step in any solution is to face up to the problem.

If the Federal Government or Opposition want to score a few points with information-starved parents in their election campaign, here are my top three.