Caring for older people in the community: policy challenges and opportunities for nursing in Australia

As the Australian population ages in line with other westernised countries, the health care needs of older people are becoming increasingly complex, with a growing emphasis on self-care management in diverse community settings. These changing needs have important implications for future care models and in 2011 this has focused policy attention in the form of a federal government inquiry into caring for older Australians by the Productivity Commission. This inquiry and previous reviews have highlighted the need for reform, drawing attention to the complexities of navigating the current system, overlapping interfaces, service gaps, quality issues, workforce shortages and an unclear funding model. A new model is called for that is capable of meeting the needs of our growing older population. It is proposed to establish a simplified gateway to access all care services, flexible services focused in restorative care, more choice of where to receive care services and co-contributions to the cost of care by recipients.

As the evidence is assembled around how best to organise and fund care services for older people in the 21st century, attention also needs to be paid to the changing scope of nursing roles, nurse education innovation and workforce planning. Higher education programs will need to prepare nurses for an enhanced scope of practice, improved career pathways for working with older people, collaborative working with clients and other care professionals, solutions to facilitate ageing in place, greater cultural competence and increased use of assistive and information technology.

This presentation outlines the current model of community and aged care services delivery in Australia, explores key issues and opportunities and discusses ways in which caring for older people can be made more attractive to the nursing workforce in Australia through education, role development, career pathways and other incentives. Some examples of how the higher education sector is responding to the changing context in preparing nursing and other health care providers are provided.

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