



Recruiting new allies in battle to save health care

Nurse-led walk-in clinics are a viable and cost-effective solution to the GP shortage in the ACT and beyond, **LAURA FORREST AND RHIAN PARKER** write

Canberrans are finding it increasingly difficult to access primary health care from their general practitioners.

This is largely due to the shortfall of GP numbers in the ACT. Not only do people have to wait longer for an appointment, but fewer general practices are offering bulk-billing services to the general public. The recent Productivity Commission report on Government Services shows the ACT has one of the lowest ratios of GPs per head of population in Australia.

In response to this problem, the ACT GP taskforce was established to find sustainable solutions to this issue. They have made 30 recommendations, a number of which centre around the retention of GPs within the workforce and recruitment of GPs to the ACT. The taskforce also acknowledges the need to build the primary health-care team to incorporate more allied health professionals and nurses, to create a more sustainable future for general practice.

Many of these are long-term solutions, but the reality is we have an immediate problem. As a more immediate response, ACT Health has taken a novel approach by proposing the establishment of a nurse-led walk-in clinic to improve accessible, affordable and timely access to primary health care for the Canberra community. Nurse-led walk-in clinics are staffed by nurse practitioners with advanced

qualifications and experience, and offer consultation without appointments and for extended hours. Nurse-led walk-in clinics are not a new idea internationally. In 2000, the British government began a program of establishing 40 nurse-led walk-in clinics in England. The clinics provide one-off health care in convenient locations. These clinics are staffed by nurses who are supported by computerised decision support systems, and ensure patient continuity of care by feeding back information to the patient's doctor. These clinics have been independently evaluated by a research team from the University of Bristol.

This evaluation of the nurse-led walk-in clinics in Britain has shown the primary reason that patients attended these clinics rather than going to their GP, was that they could be seen more quickly at the clinic, rather than waiting for an appointment with their GP. The most common presentations at the clinics were for viral illnesses, unprotected sexual intercourse, minor injuries and wound dressings. The patients attending nurse-led walk-in clinics were very satisfied with the overall service they received. This included the care, treatment and advice received from nurses.

Nurse-led walk-in clinics have also been shown to provide primary care to groups within the population who traditionally are less likely to attend their GP for medical care. Men aged between 16 and 45 years were more likely to attend the nurse-led walk-in clinics than their GP for primary care.

The cost effectiveness of nurse-led walk-in clinics in Britain has been shown to change over time. In the beginning, the cost to the health-care system per consultation was higher than a consultation at an alternative source of medical care. However, with time, the cost of consultation at nurse-led walk-in clinics falls to become more comparable with consultations at a general practice. As the ACT Division of General Practice points out, the cost effectiveness of these clinics is important, as the resources could be better directed towards existing general practices to increase their capacity and adopt integrated team-based models of care. But the immediate problem still remains. Where are we going to get the GPs who will work in these practices?

It would seem that patients are the true beneficiaries of nurse-led walk-in clinics in Britain, and the real issue in the ACT is that we currently have a significant problem with timely and affordable access to primary care. Nurse-led walk-in clinics offer one solution to this problem and have been shown to be effective in other countries in improving timely and affordable access to primary health care. Why don't we give them a go?

■ **Dr Laura Forrest and associate professor Rhian Parker from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute at the Australian National University, are preparing a report on the effectiveness of nurse-led clinics.**