

Workforce Plan for the ACT Health Sector: 2011-2013 ACT Health

Speech Pathology Australia response to ACT Health June 2010

Speech Pathology Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the ACT Health Workforce Plan. We congratulate ACT Health on taking steps to understand and address issues affecting the future health workforce.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing approximately 4,500 members. Speech pathologists are university qualified specialists who provide a variety of services to people with communication and swallowing difficulties that may present across the lifespan and thus play a crucial role in the provision of services promoting optimal consumer health outcomes.

Background Information

Health service demand drivers include population growth, an ageing population, the changing nature and chronic burden of disease and an increasing focus on health prevention, health promotion and wellness. As demand for health services increases, demand for allied health workers including speech pathologists will increase. Economic and workforce data anticipate significant health workforce labor shortages in the future (Source: Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2005).

Speech Pathology workforce data: (Source: AHWAC March 2006)

- 81.8% of speech pathologists are under 44 years of age
- 96.4% of speech pathologists are women
- Less than 65% of speech pathologists work fulltime
- In the ACT (2001), 43 Speech Pathologists were employed in health positions an increase of 28.6% from 1996
- In comparison to all States and Territories, the ACT has the lowest number of speech pathologists employed per 100,000 people, 12 speech pathologists per 100,00 compared with up to 19 speech pathologists in South Australia.
- From 1996 to 2006, the number of speech pathologists working in the age ranges of 45 -48 years; 50 – 54 years and 55 – 59 years tripled. This spike in the speech pathologist working populations represents the cohort of baby boomers who will commence to retire in 2010. (Source: 2006 Census data). This will place a further burden on the availability of working professionals to service increasing needs of health and community services.

Current and Future National Workforce Issues

Speech pathologists are employed across a number of different industries including primary health, education, health, residential care, disability and community services (Source: Australian Job Search, 2005). Economic data, workforce surveys and review of clinical practice reveal that recruitment and retention of speech pathologists and the level of service delivery in all of these industries is affected by the following:

- The occupation of Speech Pathologists is included under the General Skilled Migration and Employer Nomination Scheme Occupation List. This indicates that the profession is in the skilled shortage list. (Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2010)
- An acute shortage of qualified allied health professionals in rural and regional areas in all disciplines,



- particularly in regions inhabited by indigenous Australians;
- A national shortage of speech pathologists (Source: Australian Job Search, 2005). Significant shortages are evident in education, paediatrics, disability services, locum positions and regional and outer metropolitan areas (Source: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2004).
 - The vacancy level for speech pathology positions is high with 89% of vacancies arising from job change (changing employers), compared with 8% from job openings (speech pathologists leaving the occupation) and 3% from new jobs (employment growth for speech pathologists). (Source: Australian Job Search, 2005);
 - Retention issues contributed to, at least in part, by the profession being predominantly female (96.4%), and associated lifestyle factors such as child rearing, community commitments, further study and elder care.
 - Relatively young workforce with a majority being under 44 yrs of age
 - An increase (from 1996 to 2006) by one third of speech pathologists in the 44 - 49; 50 - 54 and 55 - 59 age range who are classified as baby boomers and are commencing retirement now.
 - Low proportion (56%) of speech pathologists in full-time jobs (Australia Job Search, 2005);
 - Reduced working hours - speech pathologists working an average of 37.9 hours per week compared to 42.1 hours per week for all occupations (Australia Job Search, 2005), with just 62.5% working more than 4 days per week (Belcher, Kealey, Jones & Humphreys, 2005).

Are more than a third of your workforce expected to retire in the next 10 years?

Are significant numbers of people leaving your profession and if so, why? and what would attract them to stay?

The majority of the speech pathology workforce is under 44 yrs of age. However there is an increase in the numbers of speech pathologists aged 44 to 59 (at 2006) who will be starting to retire now in 2010. A current and ongoing challenge for the profession is high attrition. Fifty two percent (52%) of Queensland new graduate speech pathologists felt they would remain in the profession for less than 10 years (McLaughlin et al, 2008). This suggests a significant proportion of speech pathologists are planning on leaving the profession well before retirement age. Emerging themes explaining the reason for attrition from the profession include large caseloads and workloads and subsequent time pressures, lack of professional respect, lack of autonomy, reduced job satisfaction, inadequate staffing, lack of opportunities for professional development, lack of career opportunities and salaries in the adequate range only and concern for the welfare/job stress of new graduates.

A range of initiatives would support and encourage speech pathologists to remain in the profession. These initiatives include;

- Enhancing the career structure in clinical, academic, research and leadership/management domains
- Support to undertake further education through access to professional development and post graduate education (support both financial and time)
- Resources to undertake emerging and future service delivery initiatives including support for the development, delivery and maintenance of such initiatives
- Capacity to provide undergraduate teaching and training opportunities
- Resources to support implementation of best practice services and evaluation of evidence based practice
- Increasing the clinical placement capacity and variety of settings.



Is there anything that is makes it difficult to attract or retain members of your profession in the ACT?

Do you have issues in keeping your more experienced workforce- and if so, where are they going?

Speech Pathologists in the ACT are employed publicly with ACT Health (the Canberra Hospital and Aged Care and Rehabilitation), Calvary Health Care and Therapy ACT. In addition a number of private speech pathologists work across the region. Difficulty in the recruitment and retention of experienced speech pathologists (speech pathologists with >5yrs experience) has been reported amongst the profession. Most experienced speech pathologists who move to the region report doing so for family commitments (that supports a level of transience) rather than work opportunities. Services report ongoing success in recruiting to new graduate / junior speech pathologist positions however they indicate the majority of these speech pathologists leave the ACT within 5 years.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the following may be contributing to recruitment and retention issues experienced in the ACT;

- Lack of career structure; speech pathologists that do not pursue administrative/management jobs remain in clinician positions as a Health Professional Level 3. The current career structure has limited scope for acknowledgement of clinical experience, dedication and expertise. Experienced clinicians access recognition and career opportunities such as dedicated clinical specialist roles, clinical research positions, academic positions and clinical educator positions within NSW and other State Based Health, Education, Disability and Community services.
- Limited employment opportunities across the ACT. In the ACT there are 3 key public employers of speech pathologists, predominantly adult hospital based or community paediatric services. Often speech pathologists choose to leave the ACT for employment in larger organisations that can provide different and specialist work opportunities i.e. Specialised Tertiary Hospitals, Primary Health Care, Disability Sector etc.
- Majority of speech pathologists working in the ACT are from interstate. There is no undergraduate / post graduate course in speech pathology in the ACT, with the closest being Charles Sturt University in Albury. Macquarie University and Sydney University are both in Sydney, NSW.
- Workload and Caseloads; speech pathologists in the ACT report experiencing high workloads and role overload. Issues of burnout, reduced clinical efficacy and poor job satisfaction as a result of large caseloads and workloads have been reported in literature (Reference: McLaughlin et al 2008. International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology. Vol 10; No 3; June 2008) impacting on retention in positions and the profession.
- Limited financial support in accessing professional development, including inconsistency in level of support between public agencies. Knowledge and learning gained by accessing professional development contribute to speech pathologists' professional satisfaction and identity.

Is your main client group expected to increase significantly over the next few years?

Yes.

Speech pathologists are university qualified specialists who provide a variety of services to people with communication and swallowing difficulties. It is predicted "that by 2045, one quarter of all Australians will be aged 65 years or more, double the present level" (Source: Australian Government Productivity Commission 2005, ppXXIV). This change in demography will bring with it an increase in demand for care of chronic conditions relating to the ageing process, such as stroke and dementia, amongst others. Whilst data is not available regarding other sectors, with population growth an increase in demand for services will occur in the Primary Health, Education, Community and Disability sectors with improved survival rates of premature, chronically ill and disabled infants, together with improvements in early



detection of speech and language disorders. The recent spike in birth rates will impact on the need for children to have access to speech pathology services.

Is there potential to extend the scope of your profession?

Speech Pathology Australia supports a suite of initiatives to address workforce shortages. A modern workforce must have defined scopes of practice based on competence and expertise. There is opportunity for extended scopes of practice for speech pathologists with examples including: direct specialist referrals, limited prescription rights and extended practice areas of diagnostics and intervention e.g. endoscopy and oral and tracheal suctioning.

Speech Pathology Australia supports the concept of interdisciplinary learning, education and practice; however this should not compromise profession-specific competencies and training.

Is there potential to introduce an assistant role to your profession?

Speech Pathology Australia supports changes in the scope of speech pathology practice including the opportunity to delegate tasks traditionally undertaken by qualified staff. Speech pathologists are encouraged to employ support staff that have undertaken nationally accredited training. There are currently no guidelines available for speech pathologists providing work-based training for support staff. In this situation therefore, speech pathologists must be prepared and enabled the time to undertake carefully structured and planned teaching activities and competency assessment tasks in line with the principles of adult learning theory. Ongoing review of competency must be built into practice. Speech Pathology Australia core document 'Parameters of Practice' (2000) defines the role and suitable tasks for delegation to qualified support staff.

Recent changes in the Vocational Education and Training sector are heralding a range of new support roles in home and community care and aged care, for indigenous workers and expanded allied health assistant roles. All of these roles have the potential to provide assistance to service delivery by speech pathologists.

The Health Workforce, including speech pathologists as specialists in the areas of communication difficulties and swallowing problems, must be supported to meet the current and future health service demands.

For further information contact:



Gail Mulcair
Chief Executive Officer
Speech Pathology Australia
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2nd Floor, 11-19 Bank Place, Melbourne Vic 3000
Telephone: 03 9642 4899 Fax: 03 9642 4922
Email: gmulcair@speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

