

A real opportunity for SHAPE and ACHSE to lead the national debate for health system reform

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At both the Commonwealth and state level, the agenda for healthcare reform is moving rapidly. The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) is currently reviewing the health system to make recommendations for sustainable improvements to the performance of service delivery. [1] Several states have also undertaken inquiries over the past two years in response to major issues identified in the delivery of patient care within the public health system. [2,3]

The need for improvement is evident. Rising health costs, the growing impact of chronic disease, an ageing population and the inefficiencies derived through a disjointed funding and policy mechanism, are just a few of the many challenges ahead. Despite current national health expenditure being in excess of \$94 billion, [4] significant issues exist in terms of access and equity, safety and quality, poor health outcomes for Indigenous people and others with special needs, workforce shortages and a lack of focus on the promotion of health and wellbeing.

Despite evidence that health reform strategies rarely realise the targeted efficiencies and improvements, [5,6] the Federal Government has placed quite high expectations in the current NHHRC review in terms of delivering better outcomes and sustainable improvements. [1]

This current debate on how the health system should be reformed is of major interest to the members of the Society for Health Administration Programs in Education (SHAPE). SHAPE's mission is to promote excellence in aged care and

health service management education and research in the Asia Pacific region. It provides an academic forum to debate educational issues, encourage innovation and enhance research. Our academics lead the way in the research of health systems structure, policy development and service delivery.

As such, at the recent National SHAPE Symposium, conference delegates determined that SHAPE was ideally positioned to lead the call for informed public debate on health service reform. In particular, the Symposium presentation and research work by David Briggs formed a central focal point to those discussions. [7] The delegates developed a number of guiding principles that would form the framework for what was ultimately termed the 'SHAPE Declaration' of 2008. It defines our position regarding reform in terms of policy focus, systems enhancement, service delivery and governance. The central importance of health service managers and the need for government commitment to their education and development, is included as critical components of successful reform implementation.

David Briggs kindly agreed to consolidate the discussions and findings in the form of a paper (included in this issue). It was determined that the Australian College of Health Service Executives (ACHSE) would be approached to support and partner SHAPE in this venture. This of course received a positive and enthusiastic response from our close partner, the ACHSE.

The current review by the NHHRC has obvious implications for all healthcare professionals and academics within SHAPE and ACHSE. Our combined expertise, leadership skills, qualifications and professional knowledge of the healthcare system provide a great opportunity to contribute to the public debate. In partnership we are strongly positioned to provide sound leadership and advice to Government on the effective organisation and management of health services and health reform.

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In launching the 'SHAPE Declaration' in this issue, I urge all SHAPE and ACHSE members to support and contribute to our call for informed public debate. The immediate intention is to forward copies of the paper to the NHHRC and the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, and then to arrange meetings with them so as to assist the reform process. Your feedback on the 'SHAPE Declaration' and suggestions on how best to move forward are greatly valued and appreciated. I look forward to working closely with you in this important initiative.

References

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Informed Public Debate Required on the Management and Direction of the Australian Healthcare System

A key role of the Australian College of Health Services Executives (ACHSE) is to facilitate and provide a forum for informed public debate in regard to the management and direction of the Australian healthcare system. ACHSE is well-placed to provide such a forum, with its membership drawn from a vast array of healthcare professions from both clinical and non-clinical disciplines.

The National Health and Hospitals Reform Commission (NHHRC) has been established with an agenda for review and reform of the Australian healthcare system. This presents an ideal opportunity for ACHSE, in conjunction with the Society for Health Administration Programs in Education (SHAPE), to facilitate and lead informed public debate as to how the Australian healthcare system can be organised and be effectively managed in the most optimal manner.

The promotion of education and continuing professional development is enshrined within the ACHSE Mission. It is the considered view of ACHSE that it is essential that there is a commitment from government, health departments and healthcare providers to invest in and value health management education, while supporting the continuing professional development of the health management workforce. Commitment is also required for investment in the nurturing of emerging leaders in health. These commitments are required to enable the Australian healthcare system to be effectively led and managed by well-qualified and experienced health managers.

In supporting the 'SHAPE Declaration' ACHSE calls for a more informed public debate on the contribution health service managers make to the health system; the qualifications and credentialing of health service managers; and the need for significant investment into health management education, leadership and continuing professional development of the health management workforce. The College is committed to partnership with SHAPE in taking action to have the management and leadership of the health system included in the national debate on the long-term health reform plan.

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