

Australian primary health care nurses losing work during pandemic

13 May 2020, by Ben Long



Professor Elizabeth Halcomb, Professor of Primary Health Care Nursing, University of Wollongong School of Nursing. Credit: Paul Jones, UOW

A survey of primary health care nurses has found that almost half had been asked to work reduced hours, been threatened with termination or let go as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey of 637 [primary health care](#) nurses was conducted by researchers from the University of Wollongong (UOW). It found that job security and safety concerns were affecting the professional and mental health of primary care nurses.

The nurses were also concerned about the quality of care their patients were receiving during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Primary health care nurses are those who work outside of hospitals, such as in general practice and community nursing.

With social distancing and vulnerable patients being asked to stay at home, general practice nurses are faced with challenges in meeting patient needs. The Federal Department of Health has only recently made available telehealth services by [general practice](#) nurses.

The study was led by Professor Elizabeth Halcomb from UOW's School of Nursing, Australia's leading researcher in primary health care nursing.

"The primary role of many of these nurses in the community is to conduct regular check-ups with elderly and chronically ill patients. There are very real concerns that the quality of care is declining and that chronic conditions are not being managed or supported," Professor Halcomb said.

Unlike the large State-funded acute care services, primary and community health care nurses are employed in a multitude of non-government organisations and small businesses. This makes their employment highly sensitive to changes in funding, service demand and business structures.

"It is a stark reminder of the perverse nature of our funding model that nurses are faced with a lack of job security at a time when the Australian community needs them the most to both manage the [health issues](#) of the pandemic and support ongoing management of chronic conditions," Professor Halcomb said.

Not only are critical health care workers jobs under threat, but nurses working in the community are also facing health risks by potentially being exposed to patients with COVID-19.

"Adding to these concerns is the lack of availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), only around a quarter of respondents reported always having sufficient masks and gowns available. Many primary health care nurses do not have available access to supplies of protective equipment," Professor Halcomb said.

- Urgent support needs identified by survey participants include:
- provision of adequate personal protective equipment;
- clear communication from Government and

Health Departments;

- protocols for COVID management and infection control;
- appropriate funding of nursing services;
- [job security](#);
- support for nurses' self-care and for primary health care nurses to be valued for the role they play in times of a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We want to fast track the release of this data, which could potentially influence policy and practice in the short and long term," Professor Halcomb said.

More information: Elizabeth Halcomb et al. Title: The experiences of primary health care nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, (2020). [DOI: 10.22541/au.158931132.20227658](https://doi.org/10.22541/au.158931132.20227658)

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