

Professions Reference Group communiqué

The Professions Reference Group (PRG) met via video conference on Wednesday 8 March 2023. The meeting was chaired by Julianne Bryce from the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation.

The PRG discussed the following:

Chief Executive - verbal update

Appearance at Senate Estimates

The CEO has appeared at a supplementary budget estimates hearings on 16 February 2023. My appearance provided an opportunity to aid transparency and further respond to questions that Senators have about the National Scheme and health practitioner regulation. The [transcript](#) (uncorrected) is published on the Senate estimates website.

The three main areas of focus were:

- the area of practice endorsement for cosmetic surgery; mainly around clarifying the process and approval pathways and how this will work in concert with other reforms agreed by Health Ministers to better protect and inform the public;
- our blueprint for reform for sexual misconduct matters, including our upcoming review of the criminal history standard, expanding our notifier support service, and potentially a greater role for Tribunals in reinstatement decisions;
- COVID-19 vaccination and public health – continued claims that Ahpra is censoring and disciplining doctors and other health practitioners for questioning the vaccines and wider questions about vaccine safety which are not an area for us as health practitioner regulators to respond to.

Ahpra has also accepted the 'invitation' to appear at the May/June budget estimate hearings.

Outcomes of February Health Ministers meeting.

On 24 February 2023, Health Ministers met and discussed three significant issues of importance to the National Scheme.

The first issue was responding to the reports of professional misconduct and sexual boundary violations by registered health practitioners. Ministers noted [our blueprint to improve public safety in health regulation](#) which we announced on 14 February 2023 and includes our commitments to publicly review the Criminal History registration standards that apply to registered health practitioners, expand our Notifier Support Service and commission research on the outcomes of sexual misconduct matters.

They also agreed to request Ahpra and National Boards to urgently undertake, including:

- to expand the information available on the national public registers to include, in addition to any current immediate action, the regulatory history of practitioners in respect to final decisions relating to professional misconduct in relation to sexual boundary violations.
- improve the explanatory information available to the public on the regulatory action that has been taken regarding a practitioner who has proven findings of professional misconduct (sexual boundary violations).
- request that Ahpra and National Boards to take steps to enable committees of the National Scheme that are responsible for making regulatory decisions, regarding individual practitioner conduct matters, comprise a minimum community membership of 50 per cent.

Rapid review of reviews

Health Ministers also agreed to:

- pursue legislative amendments to the National Law to introduce “reinstatement order” requirements for practitioners who have been previously had their registration cancelled, in alignment with s149E and s163B of the National Law as in force in New South Wales, and
- undertake a rapid review of the previous reviews related to the management of professional misconduct related to sexual boundary violations across all jurisdictions (including Ahpra, National Boards and the co-regulators in New South Wales and Queensland. This review will be led by the Commonwealth.

Regulatory Operations – verbal update

Registration update

Across the whole of Registration there has been a 9% increase in registration applications in the same period as last year, indicating there has been growth across the profession.

There has been a 37% increase in international medical graduates (IMGs) new applications and these applications are continuing to come in at a slow pace which is extending the normal time frames for this round to finish.

Graduate campaign

Many process improvements were made for the bulk approval process with 89% of applications finalised this year via this process compared to 75% in the same period last year. Process improvements have meant faster finalisation timeframes with less demand on resources.

There has been enhanced support this year for applicants identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A small engagement and support team is reaching out to all identified applicants to see if they require assistance 70 applicants contacted the team for assistance and informal feedback is that this has been of benefit for identified applicants.

Cosmetic surgery enforcement unit

A proactive and targeted audit of cosmetic surgery advertising is underway. We identified practitioners for review by searching for common cosmetic procedures and assessing the practitioners with the highest position on search results and practitioners with the most active social media accounts. In this way we are prioritising our effort on the practitioners most likely to be found by potential patients. Practitioners subject to cosmetic surgery notifications are also included in the proactive audit.

For each practitioner we identify related websites and social media accounts and review publicly available information on those accounts. Where we identify potential breaches of the advertising rules we write to practitioners identifying areas to rectify and seeking their response. Following practitioner response we will re-assess their advertising and make recommendations to the Medical Board regarding any further regulatory action.

We have completed 40 practitioner audits and three organisational audits.

Workforce strategy update

Members noted the context and development of the National Scheme workforce strategy, including alignment with the National Cabinet submission and our contributions to the national health workforce taskforce, and considered and provided the feedback above on the current draft National Scheme workforce strategy.

Transformation Program update

The new system design will enable Ahpra to uniquely identify registered practitioners from graduates through their whole career as a registered practitioner in a regulated profession. Currently we are in the ‘build’ phase and expect testing to commence after the 30 March 2023.

Julianne Bryce

Chair

Professions Reference Group