

8 December 2023

Dr Mike Freeland MP

Chair

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport

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Dear Dr Freeland,

Thank you for the opportunity for Dietitians Australia to present at the hearing for the Inquiry into Diabetes on Friday 17 November 2023. Below gives the details of the extra information we offered to provide on the challenges as a self-regulated profession and the growth of the dietetic workforce.

Self-regulation

Dietitians Australia is the regulatory body for the dietetic profession in Australia. Our rigorous regulatory standards are based on those established by the National Alliance of Self Regulating Health Professions (NASRHP) and benchmarked against the standards administered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). Our standards set the foundation of, and guarantee safe, effective and evidence-based practice. The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program assures that nutrition experts credentialed as APDs or Advanced APDs have a minimum of 4 years of university training in nutrition with supervised practice prior to graduation. To ensure their skills and expertise remain current, APDs are also required to undertake continuing professional development, demonstrate recency of practice, adhere to a Code of Conduct and are subject to an annual professional audit. Despite these rigorous standards, there are many limitations to being a self-regulated profession. Importantly, the title 'dietitian' is not protected by law. Having title protection would afford dietitians greater ability to work to full and expanded scope of practice as scope could be more consistently applied across the country. Currently, dietetic scope of practice is often determined by jurisdictions and employers and is not applied either consistently or universally. Appropriate recognition of dietitians and their scope can enable better resource allocation and delivery of services to support consumers healthcare journeys.

Workforce

Dietitians Australia currently represents over 8,900 members. As a membership body for a self-regulated health profession, this number does not represent the totality of Australia's dietetic workforce, which is estimated to be higher.

There's a shortfall in uptake of and utilisation of dietitians in health services across the country. A study published last year, reported that within 4-6 months of graduation only 60% of dietetic graduates were employed in a role that required their degree.¹ At the end of November 2023, we had approximately 500 members who were in our seeking work or unemployed membership category. However, we know there is a burgeoning need for services to address the growing prevalence of chronic disease across the community. With the number of dietitians seeking employment currently, there is untapped potential within the workforce to provide dietetic support for the prevention, management and treatment of diabetes.

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Australian universities continue to bolster the dietetic workforce through increased dietetic programs. The number of graduating dietitians is steadily growing. In the last 5 years, 7 new programs have achieved program qualification with Dietitians Australia, 2 of which have since achieved their full accreditation. Currently there are 21 accredited dietetic training programs across 17 universities in Australia. Please note that this figure differs to that provided at the hearing, however this is the most current number.

We collect data on the number of graduates annually, with the latest figures indicating that approximately 700 dietitians graduated in the most recent cohort. This number has gradually increased over time. For comparison, 20 years ago there were only approximately 100 graduate dietitians annually. There has been a more rapid rise recently with the number of graduating dietitians increasing approximately 3-fold in the last decade. With increasing recognition of the role of APDs and need for their services, coupled with Australia's aging population and the contribution of diet to the burden of disease, the demand for growing the profession will continue to increase.

Full uptake of the available dietetic workforce would ensure more services are available to people living with chronic disease, including diabetes. It would also ensure that use of current workforce resources are maximised, particularly important in areas of high need. Alongside reimbursable Medicare sessions, dietitians, with their diversity of skills, can be effectively engaged in all aspects of prevention, management and treatment of diabetes, including in the development of a National Nutrition Policy, development and implementation of nationwide prevention programs and delivery of care in block funded services.

In addition to expanding the workforce, there are also opportunities to look at innovative models of care and service provision, such as group settings and the use of technology to enable the dietetic workforce to reach more people. Evidence from Queensland has demonstrated the clinical and cost effectiveness of Dietitian First Gastroenterology Clinics, where consumers who are on gastroenterology wait lists are seen by an Accredited Practising Dietitian as the first point of contact.² This model has high levels of consumer satisfaction and has resulted in reduced wait lists and treatment times. It also reduced overall health service usage compared to medical specialist-led services and resulted in reduction in symptom severity and increases in quality of life following dietary management.^{3,4} This example highlights opportunities for innovative multidisciplinary models of care, led by dietitians, that could be applied to the management of diabetes and obesity to drive better outcomes.

Thank you again for the opportunity for us to demonstrate the valuable role that APDs and a National Nutrition Policy play in improving outcomes in relation to diabetes in Australia. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this further detail and are happy to answer any additional questions. We look forward to the outcomes of the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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References

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