

24 February 2011

2407/E

Mr Andrew McGowan
Inquiry Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Infrastructure and Communications
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Email: ic.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr McGowan

Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network

Royal College of Nursing, Australia (RCNA) is pleased to provide feedback on the House Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Communications Inquiry into the role and potential of the National Broadband Network.

RCNA is the peak professional organisation for nurses in Australia. RCNA represents nurses across all areas of practice throughout Australia. RCNA has members in all states and territories of Australia, and internationally. A not-for-profit organisation, RCNA provides a voice for nursing by speaking out on health issues that affect nurses and the community. With representation on government committees and health advisory bodies, RCNA is recognised as a key centre of influence in the health policy arena in Australia. When health policy decisions are made, RCNA presents a professional nursing perspective, independent of political allegiance.

The development and installation of a contemporary information technology (IT) system is essential and should be a priority for the Australian Government. RCNA is strongly supportive of investment in the infrastructure of a national broadband system. Rural communities and, in particular, rural and remote health services are disadvantaged by poor telecommunication systems. These less-than-adequate systems can and do have a negative impact on community health outcomes. The existing copper network has a limited capacity and replacement with fibre optics will enable an increased demand for information transfer to an unprecedented level of capacity.

The National Broadband Network (NBN) should provide nurses with better access to e-Health solutions, however, significant knowledge gaps in relation to information and communication technology exist within the nursing profession. There is a substantial need to support the up-skilling of nurses in IT.

There is a critical need to improve basic IT access and connectivity as well as a need to increase IT literacy amongst nurses. Common barriers to the uptake of electronic mechanisms include:

- a lack of availability of computers
- significant double entry requirements in community nursing
- many services are still paper based
- limited access to internet
- a lack of connectivity
- no mobile access in the field.

In the transition to a national eHealth system through the NBN, adequate funding and resources must be extended for eHealth teaching, training, change management and to support health care practitioners and managers.

RCNA recommends the introduction of national standards relating to information technology and computer skills to ensure optimisation of national e-Health systems and to effectively achieve better health outcomes through the NBN.

While in support of the NBN, RCNA does have some concerns with the anticipated ability of the NBN to contribute to the optimal capacity and technological requirements of a network to deliver the proposed outcomes listed in the Terms of Reference. RCNA is concerned by reports that the technology may struggle to cope with the increased demand and variety of data placed on the system. The possibility that the technology could need replacing before the installation of the NBN is completed would serve to maintain the access inequities and disadvantages in rural and remote communities.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information or discussion. I look forward to the outcomes of the current NBN consultation.

Sincerely

Debra Y Cerasa FRCNA FCN
Chief Executive Officer