



Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding

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Name: Speech Pathology Australia
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Patrick Mullane
Special Counsel
Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding
Submitted via: submissions.HFI@specialcommission.nsw.gov.au

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Dear Mr Mullane

Speech Pathology Australia thanks the Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding for the opportunity to make a submission.

Speech Pathology Australia is the national peak body for speech pathologists in Australia, representing more than 14,000 members. Speech pathologists are university trained allied health professionals with expertise in the diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of communication and swallowing difficulties.

We provide recommendations in the following areas:

1. Workforce capacity and capability
2. Funding of health services delivered in hospitals and community settings.

Workforce capacity and capability

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia recommends that additional incentives be provided to speech pathology students and early career graduates to recruit and retain speech pathologists in public hospitals and community settings, especially those in rural areas.

Workforce challenges are a significant concern to our members with over half of the respondents to a recent membership survey reporting that workforce shortages are one of the top three challenges for the profession.

While speech pathology has seen a rapid growth in graduates in recent years, there is evidence that there are not enough speech pathologists in Australia to meet the level of need and demand. This is driven by the ageing population and growing recognition of the importance of communication and language in child development and access to community participation.

In 2021, Speech Pathology Australia invested in a workforce analysis project to understand the demand for speech pathologists and help inform approaches to workforce planning. The [Speech Pathology Workforce Analysis: Preparing for our future](#) report confirms that employers and speech pathologists report large, unmet workforce demand for speech pathologists across all sectors. Moreover, the distribution is inequitable with few or no speech pathologists in some areas of high need.

The report also found that new graduates and early career speech pathologists require additional support to increase their capability and reduce the risk of burnout. The attributes valued by speech pathologists in their workplace included high-quality supervision, flexible hours, job security and the ability to work within a team.

Students reported they would seek positions with a positive workplace culture and an environment that provides high-quality support and supervision for new graduates. These factors were valued more than income/salary and other material benefits.

Workforce shortages in regional areas were reported to be exacerbated by lack of housing, limited capacity to support new graduates and insufficient capacity to upskill new graduates to the level required for caseloads that present in regional and rural settings.

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia recommends that retention be incentivised through improved conditions of employment such as competitive salaries and additional leave.

Our members report that in recent years, many experienced clinicians are leaving the health sector for work in the private sector including NDIS. Health roles are less attractive for new graduate staff due to poor pay and poor flexibility, and recruitment these days is much less competitive, with junior clinicians going for (and getting) very senior specialised roles, due to lack of competition.

The NSW Health Service Health Professionals (state) Award 2023 is outdated. Health used to be the gold standard of job security and salary, but now health has become one of the least desired places to work as the allied health salary cannot meet the current cost of living. In addition, there needs to be greater access to professional development leave, access to other leave types, and flexible work solutions that support women to return to the workforce.

Funding of health services delivered in hospitals and community settings

Recommendation

Speech Pathology Australia recommends that minimum levels of speech pathology staffing be applied to hospital and community settings based on workloads and complexity of patient populations.

There is high demand for speech pathology services with large areas of unmet need. In New South Wales, there are estimated to be 42 speech pathologists per 100,000 population which is consistent with the average across Australia. However, speech pathologists were unevenly distributed with some areas of high population need with low numbers of speech pathologists. For example, Penrith and Fairfield have high population need but low ratio of speech pathologists at 26.66 per 100,000 and 21.25 per 100,000 respectively.

Our workforce report, [Speech Pathology Workforce Analysis: Preparing for our future](#), shows that at the national level:

- more than half of all clients (55 percent) wait more than 12 weeks for an initial appointment; and
- 42 percent of those classified as high priority still wait more than a month for a first appointment.

A survey of 252 members in NSW shows that:

- more than 27 percent have a waiting list of more than 6 months;
- only 7.5 percent of respondents can take on new referrals as they arise; and
- a further 11 percent have closed their waiting lists due to lack of availability and client turnover.

The lack of access to speech pathology services is particularly evident in rural areas where one member reported: *"In our region, of the 4 speech pathology businesses, 3 do not keep/take a waiting list as no vacancies are expected"*.

Another member reported that referrals to speech pathology have increased by over 20 percent without any increase in staffing levels.

Local Health Districts prioritise their funding for medical and nursing services over allied health and acute services over outpatient and community services. This means that there is not adequate speech pathology staffing to meet the demands of the community.

Speech Pathology Australia is keen to engage with the Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding to improve health outcomes for people living in New South Wales. Please contact Ms Leonie Scott, Manager Policy and Advocacy, [REDACTED] if Speech Pathology Australia can assist in any other way or provide additional information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Kathryn McKinley', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Kathryn McKinley
National President