

SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan


April 2021

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 7500 members, and branches in each state and territory. Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics and advocates for food and nutrition for healthier people and healthier communities. Dietitians Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the Rural Support Service of SA Health regarding the SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan.

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Dietitians Australia interest in this consultation

As the leading organisation of nutrition and dietetic professionals in Australia, Dietitians Australia supports reforms to the allied health workforce across Australia.

The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program provides an assurance of safety and quality and is the foundation of self-regulation of the dietetic profession in Australia. Accredited Practising Dietitians have an important role to play in rural and remote health.

This submission was prepared by the Dietitians Australia staff in consultation with the South Australian branch and other members following the Conflict of Interest Management Policy and process approved by the Board of Dietitians Australia. This policy can be viewed on the [Dietitians Australia website](#).

Recommendations

Dietitians Australia recommends that SA Health

1. ensure that aged care is included as a core competency in all allied health courses, and that support for further training and upskilling in aged care is given as a priority
2. develop an implementation plan for the broader workforce strategy that includes timelines, reporting responsibilities, funding commitments and strategies for monitoring and evaluation
3. advocate for amendment to Clause 23 of the *South Australian Modern Public Sector Enterprise Agreement: Salaried 2017* to remove or reduce the number of years of experience an employee must have to be eligible for flexible workplace arrangements
4. recruit LHNs to promote rural positions to high school students and increase rural placements for allied health university students
5. consider developing electronic menu ordering systems as part of digital health expansion
6. advocate for further research and development/improvement of data collection methods
7. consult with staff in LHNs to co-design appropriate and workable hybrid positions

Discussion

General comments

Dietitians Australia views the draft SA Rural Allied Health Workforce Plan as a considered and thorough appraisal of the current strengths and challenges of the South Australian rural allied health workforce. SA Health has included in the draft many strategies that can be found in recent literature and operating in other jurisdictions. Dietitians Australia agrees that the implementation of this plan, with adoption of our recommendations, will strengthen the allied health workforce in the rural setting in South Australia. Overall, Dietitians Australia supports the plan and makes recommendation for some adjustments as summarised above and detailed under the subheadings below.

The first principle, “no size fits all” is an excellent first guiding principle, reflective of the diverse nature of the roles and needs of allied health practitioners, including dietitians, in the rural setting in South Australia. Roles and needs of clinicians vary greatly from one site to the next.

Overarching considerations

Recognition needs to be given to the predominant type of care delivered in rural South Australia. The majority of beds in rural South Australian hospitals are devoted to aged care, yet allied health staff are often less well-equipped to provide appropriate and adequate care to this cohort. Dietitians Australia recommends that SA Health ensures all allied health courses include aged care as a core competency. Dietitians Australia further recommends that where aged care skills and knowledge are lacking, support for training and upskilling in this area is given as a priority. This applies across the board in allied health, including dietitians.

Dietitians Australia would also like to highlight the need for dietitians to be engaged not only in clinical care but also in providing food and nutrition advice to support delivery of appropriate food service in rural South Australian hospitals. This is particularly critical in provision of aged care in this setting.

Dietitians have a broad skillset as evidenced by the [national competency standards](#) for entry-level practitioners and our [APD role statements](#). Dietitians Australia strongly supports systems that allow practitioners to work to their full, advanced or extended scope of practice. Dietitians Australia can provide expertise to assist in this process.

Dietitians Australia would like to see an implementation plan that includes timelines, reporting responsibilities, funding commitments and strategies for monitoring and evaluation to form part of the broader workforce strategy. Without these commitments, the plan risks not meeting any of its objectives.

Theme one - Building a skilled workforce

Dietitians Australia supports the provisions under this theme. Comments related to specific sections are given below.

Sections 1.1 and 1.8 – Develop and implement a comprehensive recruitment strategy that promotes SA regional allied health positions and rural living. Establish structures and pathways to support rural students to undertake allied health training closer to home.

Dietitians Australia supports the proposed approaches outlined in these sections. SA Health may also consider recruiting LHNs to promote allied health positions to local high schools. Further, increasing rural placements for allied health university students may encourage uptake of rural positions once courses are completed. Dietitians Australia agrees that remote learning through universities and increasing regional health training opportunities may help engage rural students in allied health courses and improve retention of locally trained clinicians.

Section 1.2 – Embed and promote flexible workforce arrangements that optimise allied health workforce responsiveness

Dietitians Australia strongly supports flexible workforce arrangements to meet the fluctuating needs of rural populations and to support the personal needs of individual clinicians better. While Dietitians Australia supports the notion that this may help improve retention and make allied health positions in rural and remote settings more attractive, we note that flexible work arrangements detailed in Clause 23 of the *South Australian Modern Public Sector Enterprise Agreement: Salaried 2017* only apply to employees with a minimum of 10 years' experience in the occupation. These arrangements, therefore, would not help to attract recent graduates or other professionals with less than 10 years' experience. Dietitians Australia strongly recommends that SA Health advocate for amendment to the enterprise agreement at the time of its renegotiation to address this issue.

Section 1.7 – Introduce and embed contemporary retention and reward approaches for regional LHN allied health.

Dietitians Australia strongly supports this provision, particularly the inclusion of a relocation allowance and non-remuneration retention strategies such as accommodation and childcare. Dietetics is a young female-dominated profession. To be successful, retention strategies need to take into consideration the demographics and likely needs of the profession.

Section 1.15 – Embed and implement evidence-based initiatives that enable all regional allied clinicians to adequately access supervision and mentorship opportunities.

Dietitians Australia strongly supports this provision. Dietitians Australia runs the Provisional APD Program which is a program designed to help entry-level dietitians (and those returning to the profession after an extended break) meet professional standards and deliver safe and effective quality care. The program includes a minimum of 12 months of mentoring by a fully qualified APD who has expertise in a relevant area. Mentoring is both supported and encouraged throughout the career of the APD and Dietitians Australia has an online system to help APDs find a mentor. South Australian APDs working in rural and remote settings can already use this system to locate an APD mentor. Mentoring may be conducted by digital means allowing those in the program to connect with APDs across the country. Dietitians Australia would support SA Health exploring further options for allied health practitioners, including dietitians, to access broader mentoring, peer support or supervision opportunities and would welcome consultation and collaboration with our members.

Theme two - New and sustainable workforce models for rural health care

Dietitians Australia supports the provisions under this theme. Comments related to specific sections are given below.

Sections 2.1-2.4, 2.6, 2.7 – in relation to digital infrastructure and digital health provision

Dietitians Australia supports the expansion and further development of digital health platforms, including use of telehealth. Dietitians Australia strongly supports the use of telehealth where clinically appropriate and particularly where it facilitates access to services in rural and remote settings. The benefits of providing telehealth dietetic services are discussed in detail in Dietitians Australia's [position statement on telehealth](#).

The need to leverage digital health options is particularly important for dietitians who have outreach sites within their catchment. Dietitians Australia recommends SA Health consider developing electronic menu ordering systems as part of this digital health option. This would enable rural dietitians to perform their roles at outreach sites more efficiently and effectively. It would also further reduce nutritional risks (including food allergies) in local food services.

Section 2.8 – improve the capture, reporting and the analysis of allied health workforce data and trends to enhance service planning and future modelling

Dietitians Australia strongly supports collection, analysis and reporting of regional workforce data and trends. If current datasets are found to be inadequate for workforce planning purposes, Dietitians Australia strongly recommends advocating for further research and development/improvement of appropriate data collection methods. The lack of data impedes workforce planning and strategies to improve access to adequate and appropriate care.

Sections 2.9 and 2.10 – strategic service planning and allied health-led models of care

As already indicated, in rural South Australian hospitals aged care beds far exceed the number of acute care beds. The need for skilled aged care allied health practitioners is therefore extremely important in this context. Current systems fail to recognise the proportion of patients with aged care

needs and fail to address their needs adequately. Dietitians Australia recommends that priority be given to providing training and upskilling opportunities in aged care for all allied health practitioners working in rural South Australia, and to ensure aged care is included as a core competency in allied health training.

Section 2.11 – establish innovative and hybrid positions for allied health in rural areas

Dietitians Australia agrees that hybrid positions should be explored. These types of positions may be difficult to implement given the diverse operating standards of LHNs and sites within LHNs. Dietitians Australia recommends further consultation with staff in LHNs to co-design appropriate and workable hybrid model(s).

Theme three - Developing a collaborative and coordinated health system

Dietitians Australia supports all provisions under this theme.