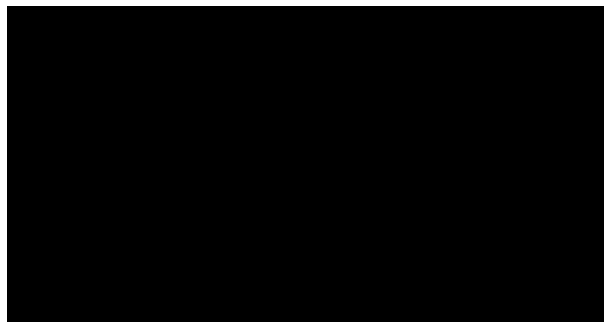Australian College of Nurse Practitioners response to:

Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional
Development, Communication and the Arts

2024 Regional Telecommunications Review

Contact:

Policy Advisor

11th July 2024

Review Committee
Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development,
Communication and the Arts

Dear Review Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the 2024 Telecommunications Review.

The Australian College of Nurse Practitioners (ACNP) is the national peak organisation for Nurse Practitioners, advancing nursing practice and consumer access to health care.   A key focus for the role and scope of practice development for Nurse Practitioners is on unmet needs within the community and increasing access to health care.

In this submission, the ACNP will highlight

- The need to increase telecommunications coverage to improve health services in rural, regional and remote areas
- Improvements required in accessing digital training
- The importance of providing ongoing timely telecommunications support

BACKGROUND
Nurse Practitioners work in diverse healthcare settings, including general practice, primary care clinics, urgent care clinics, acute and emergency services and community health centres.[1,2] Research has shown that patients consistently report high levels of satisfaction with the care delivered by Nurse Practitioners.[3-7] This heightened satisfaction not only signifies a positive outcome, but also plays a pivotal role in enhancing patient adherence to treatment plans and ultimately contributes to improved health outcomes. Moreover, such positive impacts have the potential to reduce the overall cost of care. The demonstrated success of Nurse Practitioners in fostering patient satisfaction highlights their invaluable role in the Australian healthcare landscape, representing a significant step towards more effective and cost-efficient healthcare delivery.
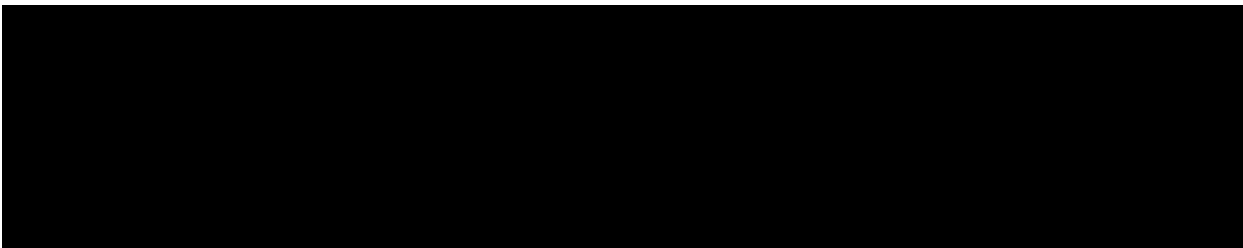
Many Nurse Practitioners work in rural, regional and remote areas and we welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation questions.

Our response is as follows:

What initiatives or tools could be implemented by the telecommunications industry or government to improve connectivity literacy, and make it easier for regional consumers and businesses to understand their connectivity options and help them to choose affordable services that meet their needs?

The use of technology is important for nurses, health services, health care businesses and consumers to enhance the health, quality of life, and wellbeing. Yet there is insufficient technology infrastructure to support a safe and highly efficient work environment for health care professionals and services in rural areas.

- Better access to coverage maps is needed whilst registering and addressing the black spots. The Digital plan relies on data provided by the carriers, which is often under-reporting the issues. Commonwealth and State government needs to demand better data to improve coverage issues.
- Improved engagement with telecommunication providers is required instead of offshore call centres as well as addressing issues in a timely way.
- Simplifying the equipment, e.g. routers

What further initiatives can be implemented to support First Nations communities in developing and leading their own digital inclusion solutions while ensuring cultural appropriateness?

The ACNP supports the Australian Government First Nations Digital Inclusion Plan (2023-26) and encourages Government to collaborate with communities and organisations, such as the ACNP and CATSINaM who have a key role in contributing to the implementation of this strategic framework and suite of actions to help improve First Nations people's quality of life.

Could the NBN fixed wireless network or other alternative networks be used to provide reliable and affordable voice services in remote areas? Are there any consumer safeguards or guarantees that need to remain or be changed under reformed universal service arrangements?

NBN fixed wireless networks will improve digital connectivity and equity for rural and regional communities, across a huge range of areas, in particular health services and safety during
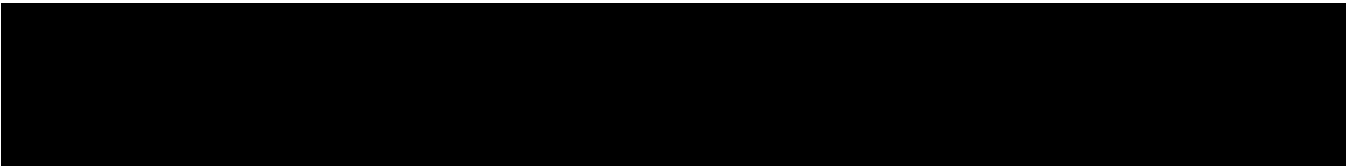
disasters and emergencies. The consumer safeguards that need to be in place is clarity about costs, that is, plans, equipment etc. as well as access in obtaining assistance to an issue in a reasonable timeframe via phone or online. Cost should not be prohibitive.

In modernising universal service arrangements, should access to public phone infrastructure continue and are there particular areas of need? Could technologies beyond traditional payphones be explored to meet this need?

Payphones have always been and continue to play a vital role in keeping people connected, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the community. We therefore feel strongly that the infrastructure continues, however improved knowledge about and access to the pre-paid phonecards is needed. The ACNP believes that improved public WiFi networks across rural, regional and remote areas is needed to provide reliable internet access. This is particularly important for high priority disadvantaged and low-income areas.

What should the minimum internet speed guarantee be (currently a peak speed of 25/5 Mbps) to meet modern needs? Should minimum data download/upload allowances be regulated? What other factors are important, like latency, reliability and affordability?

The peak speed of 25/5 is acceptable as a minimum internet speed guarantee, whilst acknowledging that NBN speeds are about 50/20. We feel that speeds could be improved in rural areas, by improving cell networks, increasing 4G and 5G coverage. Minimum data download/upload allowances should be regulated understanding that infrastructure will be needed to support that.

How can we achieve equity with respect to mobile services (voice, data and SMS) in regional, rural and remote communities and on regional and remote roads?

The inequities experienced by regional, rural and remote communities is;
- the lack of availability of digital services. With most nursing practices and health services using telehealth consultations, rural areas don't have access to high-speed internet required for telemedicine services. Patient's and health care providers need fixed and mobile connectivity to deliver healthcare. Digitisation of health records is also vitally important, along with consistent and reliable access to eHealth.
- the technical ability to use digital services. This could be improved with access to digital proficiency training and more IT professionals
- affordability
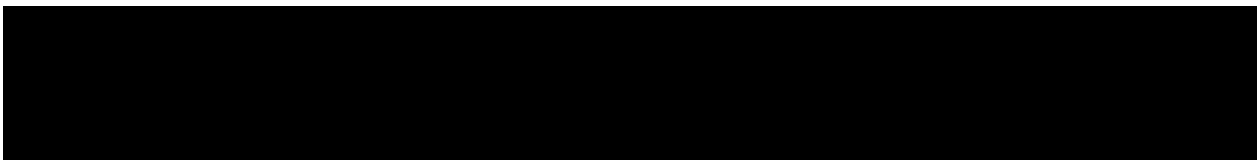
The cost of building and maintaining telecommunications infrastructure in rural and remote areas can be a barrier to offering better services. What can be done to improve the fixed broadband options available to regional, rural and remote Australians?

As above, whilst we acknowledge that the rollout of NBN in rural and remote areas is costly and therefore a barrier to offering better services, the ACNP believes that improving digital mobile networks, especially fast-tracking the 5G rollout in high demand rural areas is vital. Also installing high-capacity fixed wireless services in larger population areas. In the longer term though, Government should continue to push for lower retail prices from NBN companies to encourage improved utilisation of network capacities.

How could Australian Government programs better align with state, territory and local government planning and funding processes in delivering telecommunications services and infrastructure?

The Australian Government needs to better align with the work already being done by the states, territories and local government. Regional Digital plans prepared by the local government areas in Victoria, for example, involve extensive face to face consultation and identifies problems and potential solutions for both the present and the future. Those recommendations should inform an appropriate course of action by the required Government.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in this important review. We are happy to be contacted to participate further or provide clarification.
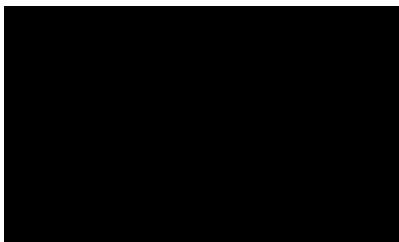
Chief Executive Officer
Australian College of Nurse Practitioners
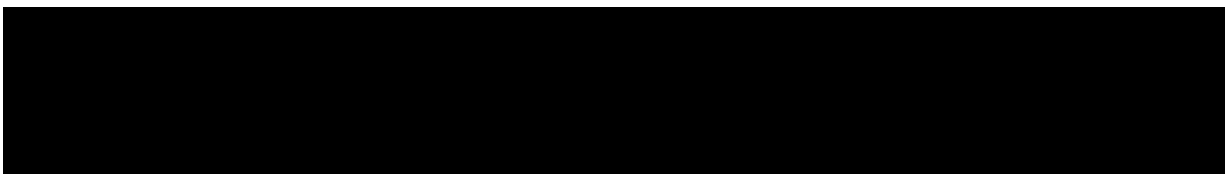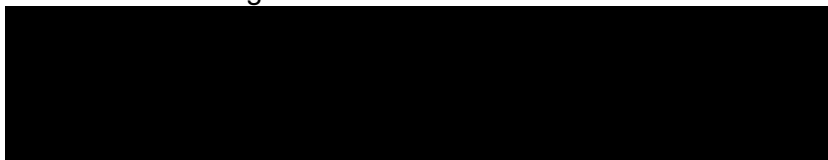
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