

SOUTH PACIFIC NURSES FORUM: Country Report

Organisation: Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) Federal Office	Report by: Catelyn Richards – Federal Assistant Secretary
<i>Provide a brief overview of the changes, challenges and opportunities within nursing and midwifery since the 2024 SPNF report:</i> The period since 2024 has been one of significant challenge and growing momentum for the nursing, midwifery, and care workforce we represent – currently 356,000 members. Across Australia (as with the broader South Pacific region), our members continue to navigate long-standing structural pressures and emerging reform imperatives that demand urgent and sustained action. Workforce sustainability remains our most pressing concern. Shortages, burnout, and attrition are systemic, driven by inadequate staffing ratios, undervalued work reflected in insufficient pay, the financial burden placed on students through unpaid mandatory placements, and a persistent failure to translate post-pandemic recognition of our members’ contributions to health and wellbeing into lasting legislative protections. Through resolutions carried at the ANMF 17th Biennial National Conference in October 2025, our members have made clear that these issues have deepened to the point where incremental action is no longer sufficient. Members, and thus the ANMF, are calling for safe staffing levels to be embedded in the National Safety and Quality Healthcare Service Standards and for specific criminal protections against occupational violence comparable to those afforded to police, firefighters, and paramedics. In Australia, our aging population means that people are living longer often with complex comorbid conditions that need ongoing care. When people can no longer be safely or effectively cared for in their own homes, they will often move into a nursing home where round-the-clock care can be provided. Many nursing home residents thus have complex presentations and multiple conditions that need to be managed and treated along with their everyday care needs. Following considerable advocacy and campaigning, nursing homes must legally provide a minimum number of direct care minutes to each resident according to a standardised classification system and an aggregated average number of direct care minutes across all residents. Within this too, is the requirement to ensure that at least one registered nurse is on site at all times (24.7). Despite this, many nursing homes are still not meeting their mandated care minute targets, or RN 24/7 and residents are not receiving the care they need. This occurs in a wider context where the nursing and personal care workforce is often	

not supported by unscrupulous providers which are known to ‘game’ the system and extract profit from both government and consumer-derived funding while not employing a sufficiently sized and skilled workforce.

In aged care, we have continued to prosecute the reform agenda that followed the Royal Commission, but implementation gaps remain deeply concerning. Our members have reported that mandated care minutes are not being honoured by employers, that wage increases are not reaching workers in full, and that the enrolled nurse workforce, which is critical to safe, high-quality care, remains structurally under-supported and financially under-incentivised. We are pursuing legislative accountability mechanisms and have called for urgent ministerial engagement to address these failures directly. A forthcoming national campaign will also prosecute three key asks for aged care reform; occupational violence and aggression, staffing levels and skill mix with mandated minimum staff: resident ratios, and transparent use and accountability of funding.

Gender equity continues to be both a workforce and a social justice imperative for the ANMF. As a profession that is predominantly female, our members bear the compounding effects of systemic undervaluation of women’s work, income protection gaps, inadequate superannuation arrangements, and industrial frameworks that restrict their rights relative to workers in other sectors.

Looking to the South Pacific, we recognise that the challenges facing our members do not exist in isolation. Migration of skilled nurses and midwives from Pacific Island nations to Australia represents a serious and ongoing capacity drain on health systems that have far fewer resources to absorb those losses. While Australia faces current and future skills and workforce shortages including across nursing and midwifery, we are concerned that a lack of appropriate workforce planning has left Australia vulnerable to an over-reliance on skilled migration in these sectors. We have recommended to Government that growing the domestic skilled nursing and midwifery workforce must be a priority, with skilled migration being seen as a complimentary measure acting in association with measures to increase workforce retention. In line with the WHO’s ethical migration statement, The ANMF’s position is that skilled migration programs must be guided and evaluated through an ethical and principles-based approach. Migration strategies must adequately balance domestic needs with global health equity considerations and ensure that recruitment practices do not exacerbate healthcare deficits in source countries

Our commitments around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples cultural safety and upholding international humanitarian protections for health workers reflect our understanding that professional solidarity must extend to include a key focus on equity for a diverse workforce and community.

Through our work with the South Pacific Nurses Forum and our engagement with global nursing and midwifery bodies, we are committed to advocating for regional health workforce equity, not just for our own members but for nursing and midwifery more broadly and the communities they serve across the Pacific.

Climate change adds further urgency to this regional dimension, with Pacific Island nations facing disproportionate health burdens that will increasingly shape workforce demands across the region.

Key reforms and wins that the ANMF have achieved include:

- Secured minimum award wage increases of 15–30% for nurses and care workers in aged care.
- Australia's Registered Nurse prescribing reforms now allow suitably qualified RNs to prescribe Schedule 2, 3, 4, and 8 medicines.
- To ease cost of living pressures for nursing and midwifery students, the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP) provides financial relief for eligible university and vocational students completing mandatory, unpaid practicums. Established by the Australian Government.
- Establishment of the National Primary Care Nursing and Midwifery Scholarship Program. This initiative offers up to \$30,000 for Master's degree study (and \$15,000 for Graduate Certificates or Diplomas) to upskill nurses in primary and aged care.
- Scale-up of nurse-led urgent care clinics in many jurisdictions around Australia.
- Establishment of the Women's Health Strategy at the Federal level and expansion of this program to include specialised support for menopause and perimenopause and improved funding via Medicare and the PBS.
- Legislation of a new Aged Care Act 2025 that materially improves care and conditions for workers (though further reforms are still required).
- Reforms regarding scope of practice that allow nurse practitioners and endorsed midwives to better work to their full potential. This includes removing "collaborative arrangement" barriers, increasing Medicare rebates, and updating state-specific laws.

What are the significant issues that impact on nurses and midwives in your country today?

Overall, our [Strategic Plan 2026-2028](#) provides a comprehensive and high-level overview.

Workforce sustainability is the most pressing concern, driven by chronic shortages, burnout, unsafe staffing ratios, and high attrition. This is compounded by rising cost of living and lagging pay and financial burdens on students and workers.

Occupational violence remains unacceptably prevalent, with no specific federal legislative protection yet in place for healthcare workers. Nurses and midwives are also frequently prevented from working to their full professional scope, and advanced practice roles such as nurse practitioners lack the registration framework and public

recognition their expertise warrants, though recent reforms are beginning to take shape with scale up of nurse-led models of care including urgent care clinics.

In aged care, implementation of post-Royal Commission reforms has fallen short. Care minutes are not consistently met, wage increases are not reaching workers, and the enrolled nurse workforce remains undervalued and under-supported.

Across the professions more broadly, gender pay inequity, inadequate income protection, restricted industrial rights, and inflexible working arrangements continue to drive dissatisfaction and workforce exit. Meanwhile, gaps in Medicare rebates and prescribing rights limit the contribution nurses and midwives can make in primary and community care settings where they are often the only point of contact for vulnerable populations.

Underpinning all of this is a fundamental disconnect between the indispensable role nurses and midwives play in Australia's health system and the degree to which they are valued, protected, and resourced to do their work.

The health impacts of climate change are increasingly shaping the demands placed on nurses and midwives, from managing heat-related illness to responding to disaster and displacement. Our members have called for the profession to be recognised and resourced as leaders in planetary health advocacy, and for the National Health and Climate Change Strategy to be actively implemented.

What recruitment and retention strategies do you have for nurses and midwives in your country?

Addressing the recruitment and retention challenge in nursing and midwifery is central to the ANMF's 2026–2028 strategic agenda. Our approach is built on the understanding that sustainable workforce supply cannot be achieved through recruitment alone; the conditions that cause nurses and midwives to leave the profession must be addressed with equal urgency and any reform must include a suite of interventions and actions rather than a single 'magic bullet'.

Reducing student attrition and strengthening the pipeline

Reducing student attrition, boosting recruitment, and enhancing retention, especially in rural areas, are key to a sustainable nursing and midwifery workforce. A significant step forward was achieved through our longstanding campaign to address placement poverty: after years of lobbying, the ANMF welcomed the federal government's introduction of the Commonwealth Prac Payment in July 2025, which provides financial support to students undertaking mandatory clinical placements. We continue to call for this payment to be increased to fully offset the financial burden placed on students, particularly mature-age and female students. We are also advocating for a freeze on higher education fees for nursing and midwifery students and for the scale-up of structured undergraduate employment models that support transition into the workforce.

Safe staffing as a retention lever

Unsafe workloads are among the most powerful drivers of attrition. The ANMF will continue to advocate nationally for safer workplaces, addressing the unacceptably high levels of occupational violence that drive nurses and midwives out of the profession. We are pursuing legislated minimum staffing ratios and skill mix requirements across all sectors, embedded into the National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards, which would promote equity, improve patient care, and provide the workforce with clear, enforceable protections.

Scope of practice and career development

The ANMF is advocating for a range of strategies to improve retention, including increasing nurse practitioner positions, boosting the workforce through scholarships, increasing support for continuity of care models, improving clinical placements, and exploring financial incentives like allowances. Enabling nurses and midwives to work to their full professional scope is itself a retention strategy: where nurses and midwives have been unable to work to their scope, this has reduced their ability to undertake the work for which they were educated, leading to reduced job satisfaction and increased burnout. The recommendations of the Unleashing the Potential of our Health Workforce Scope of Practice Review represent an important opportunity in this regard.

Continuity of care models

The evidence supports investment in continuity of carer models, particularly in midwifery. Midwives working in continuity of carer models are less likely to consider leaving, and factors that encourage retention include supportive relationships with managers and other staff, strong relationships with women in their care, flexible working hours including access to part-time work, adequate remuneration, and being able to practise autonomously. We are committed to scaling up these models as both a care quality and a workforce sustainability measure.

Flexible work and work-life balance

Targeted retention strategies such as flexible work arrangements, improved workplace conditions, and comprehensive professional development programs are supported by the evidence, including recent research highlighting the need to focus retention efforts particularly within the first 12–18 months of employment when attrition risk is highest. Our 2025 Biennial Resolutions include a commitment to investigate a 32-hour work week for nurses and midwives, and to broaden the circumstances under which workers can request flexible arrangements, both of which respond directly to what members tell us about the unsustainability of current working conditions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples workforce and rural and remote settings

Recruiting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives in Australia is an ongoing challenge and must be met head-on as addressing this would be fundamental for addressing many areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' health and wellbeing lags behind that of other groups. Ending

racism in healthcare and the wider community is a core part of this. We are also committed to closing the pay gap for nurses and midwives working in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, mandating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples cultural safety training, and supporting initiatives such as Birthing on Country programs that attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives.

National workforce planning

Underpinning all of these strategies is our call for a comprehensive national nursing and midwifery workforce strategy that matches future supply and demand. The ANMF awaits the release of a national strategy to address chronic nursing and midwifery workforce issues in Australia, with a focus on recruitment and retention. We have participated actively in the Midwifery Futures Project and continue to engage with government workforce planning processes to ensure our members' experience and expertise shape national policy.

What initiatives do you have in your country to uphold the professional, social and economic position of nurses and midwives?

As Australia's largest union and professional organisation, the ANMF pursues an integrated program of initiatives across industrial, professional, and social dimensions to uphold the position of nurses and midwives.

Economic recognition and work value

Our most significant recent initiative has been the pursuit of landmark Work Value Cases before the Fair Work Commission. Our Aged Care Work Value Case secured minimum award wage increases of 15–30% for nurses and care workers in aged care, with increases being implemented through to August 2026. Building on that outcome, we launched our broader Nurses and Midwives Work Value Case, seeking increases of approximately 35.8% for nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing across all healthcare settings. This is grounded in our position that historic, gender-based undervaluation of the profession must be corrected.

Professional recognition and scope of practice

We are actively working to ensure nurses and midwives are enabled to work to their full professional scope. This includes advocating for expanded Medicare rebates and prescribing rights for advanced practice nurses and midwives, and for nurse practitioner registration to be restructured to reflect specialist expertise. We publish national policies, position statements and guidelines, and produce annual workforce data resources to support evidence-based professional advocacy.

Education and student support

After years of lobbying, we welcomed the introduction of the Commonwealth Prac Payment in July 2025, providing financial support to students on mandatory clinical placements. We continue to call for this payment to be increased, education fees to be frozen, and for expanded scholarships and nationally consistent structured student employment programs.

Gender equity and social justice

We have strongly lobbied to close the gender pay gap through superannuation reform, improved income protection, and industrial relations modernisation. Our social justice agenda also encompasses action on domestic violence, workplace racism, poverty, and flexible work. This reflects our view that the economic and social costs borne disproportionately by our predominantly female membership must be systematically addressed.

Industrial strength

We are pursuing reforms to the Fair Work Act to extend voting rights to casual workers, allow protected industrial action throughout the life of enterprise agreements, and strengthen members' industrial rights more broadly. Internationally, we represent Australian nursing through membership of the Commonwealth Nurses and Midwives Federation, the South Pacific Nurses Forum, and the International Labour Organisation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples workforce and cultural safety

The ANMF is committed to closing the significant pay gap between nurses and midwives working in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and their peers in the public hospital sector, a disparity that undermines recruitment and retention in communities with the greatest health need. Through our Nurses Award Work Value Case, we are pursuing substantial wage increases for ACCHO and primary healthcare sector nurses and midwives to bridge this gap. We are also advocating for mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples cultural safety training to be embedded across all health services nationally, and for increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples leadership at all levels of the health system. We support ongoing initiatives such as Birthing on Country programs and the work of the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives (CATSINaM) to attract, educate and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nurses and midwives. Recognising that culturally safe care is not only a workforce issue but a fundamental health equity imperative, we continue to advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' voices to shape health policy, workforce planning, and service delivery at every level.

Outline your preparedness in the event of a disaster:

The ANMF recognises that nurses, midwives, and care workers are on the frontline of Australia's response to disasters and climate-related health emergencies. Our members see first-hand the growing impact of extreme heat, poor air quality, bushfires, flooding, and the displacement caused by climate disasters. They are frequently called upon to respond under conditions of already-stretched workforce capacity.

Our approach to disaster preparedness operates across several dimensions. At the policy level, we are advocating for the full implementation of Australia's National Health and Climate Change Strategy, and have partnered with the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change to call on the federal government to place health at the centre of climate policy, including through a National Clean Air Framework with

legally binding standards and cross-sector accountability. We support new work health and safety laws to better protect workers from climate-related risks, including extreme heat, and have joined calls for employers to be required to modify or cease work when temperatures pose a risk to worker safety.

At the industrial level, our 2025 Biennial Resolutions include a commitment to secure dedicated disaster leave provisions, ensuring that members who are directly affected by disasters or who volunteer in disaster response are not financially penalised for doing so. We are also pursuing enhanced carer support services and protections for vulnerable populations who are disproportionately exposed to disaster risk.

On member education and capacity building, our Victorian Branch has developed resources and training to support members' climate change literacy and leadership in environmentally sustainable practice, including through an annual Health and Environmental Sustainability Conference and the "Nursing for the Environment" professional development program.

We are members of the Climate and Health Alliance and the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network and engage with the International Council of Nurses on climate and disaster policy at a global level.

We recognise that more needs to be done to embed disaster preparedness systematically into nursing and midwifery education, workforce planning, and health service design and we continue to advocate for the resources and frameworks necessary to support our members to lead in this space.

What are your goals for your NNA?

ANMF's Vision: Our members are empowered nurses, midwives, and care workers, who are respected and working to full scope to deliver safe, high-quality care in a world-class, equitable, and sustainable health and aged care system.

ANMF's Purpose: As Australia's largest union, we represent and advocate for the professional, industrial, and social interests of nurses, midwives, and care workers, strengthening the health and aged care systems to improve the health and well-being of all.

1. Nursing, Midwifery, and Care Workforce Reform

To secure the long-term sustainability and professional advancement of the workforce by achieving legislated minimum safe staffing levels across all sectors, eliminating placement poverty, establishing national frameworks for student transition, formalising advanced practice roles, combating occupational violence, and fostering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples workforce growth and sustainability.

2. Aged Care Reform

To ensure government funding is used appropriately, safe staffing ratios are legally enforced, and all aged care nurses and workers are supported to meet professional

standards, including through mandated care minutes, financial accountability mechanisms, professionalisation of the personal care worker workforce, and elevated recognition of nurses in end-of-life care.

3. Health and Maternity Care Equity

To champion nurse- and midwife-led models of care and promote universal, equitable access to health and maternity services including through expanded mental health services, nurse-led specialty models, improved primary care affordability, stronger immunisation programs, and technology-assisted virtual care pathways.

4. Gender Equity and Industrial Relations Reform

To close the gender pay gap, modernise industrial relations frameworks, and deliver fairer conditions for our predominantly female membership including through work value cases, superannuation reform, income protection, flexible work arrangements, and investigation of a 32-hour work week.

5. Climate Change and Social Justice

To position nurses, midwives and care workers as leaders in planetary health and human rights including through implementation of the National Health and Climate Change Strategy, ethical procurement, action on poverty and domestic violence, eradication of workplace racism, and advocacy for global humanitarian safety.

6. Organisational Strength, Governance, and Member Engagement

To ensure the ANMF is internally resilient, financially sustainable, and collectively powerful through transparent performance reporting, strengthened branch collaboration, investment in member and staff wellbeing, increased membership and participation rates, and reduction of the organisation's own environmental footprint.

What are your aspirations and suggestions for the SPNF?

The ANMF is deeply committed to the strength and sustainability of nursing and midwifery across the Pacific region and the health and wellbeing of all communities; especially the most vulnerable. Our aspirations for the SPNF reflect our recognition that the health workforce challenges facing Pacific Island nations are distinct, complex, and in many respects more acute than those we face in Australia. Genuine collaboration is required to address these challenges and the ANMF is keen to work in unity with and to support our neighbouring NAAs address issues that they also identify as key priorities for them, their members, and their communities.

Workforce sustainability and retention

We aspire to see the SPNF develop a coordinated regional approach to workforce sustainability that honestly addresses the impact of health worker migration on Pacific Island health systems. Australia benefits from the skills of nurses and midwives from Pacific Island nations, and we believe we have a responsibility to support regional workforce development in return through scholarships, educational

partnerships, structured mentorship programs, and bilateral agreements that support skills development without depleting Pacific workforces.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and other First Nations and Indigenous Peoples are also a critically important part of our workforce and it is a priority to grow, support, and maintain strong future workforces in and for these communities based truth-telling about the past and present, listening, and acknowledging and addressing that racism is, sadly, alive and well and must be ended.

Education and professional development

We would encourage the SPNF to share our combined power and work together to advocate for greater regional investment in nursing and midwifery education infrastructure, including clinical placement capacity, postgraduate pathways, and leadership development programs. Expanding access to continuing professional development across the region, including through technology-assisted and virtual learning models, could help to raise and harmonise professional standards and support nurses and midwives to work to their full scope in settings where they are often the primary or sole healthcare provider.

Safe staffing and working conditions

Safe staffing is not only an Australian issue, it is a regional imperative. We are keen to support the SPNF in developing regional position statements and advocacy frameworks around minimum staffing standards, occupational violence, and fair remuneration, recognising that the industrial protections available to nurses and midwives vary enormously across the region. Strengthening the SPNF's voice on these issues at the level of Pacific health ministries and international bodies would be a meaningful step forward.

Climate change and disaster preparedness

The Pacific region is on the frontline of climate change, and nurses and midwives are central to the health system response to climate-related disasters, displacement, and disease burden. We aspire to see the SPNF take a strong, unified position on climate and health, advocating for Pacific governments and international partners to resource health systems for climate resilience, and supporting members to develop the skills and frameworks needed to lead in disaster preparedness and response. This is an area where the collective voice of the SPNF carries particular authority on the world stage.

Cultural safety and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and First Nations leadership

We recognise that Indigenous and First Nations peoples across the Pacific have distinct health needs and experiences, and that culturally safe care is foundational to equitable health outcomes. Learning from one another, embedding cultural safety across our work, and actively supporting the development and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, and Indigenous nursing and midwifery leadership across member nations and in the wider community is a key priority.

Regional solidarity and collective advocacy among NNAs

Above all, we aspire to see the SPNF grow as a vehicle for genuine regional solidarity. To be a forum in which NNAs and nurses and midwives across the Pacific can share knowledge, amplify each other's voices and advocacy, and present a unified voice to governments and international health bodies on the issues that matter most to our members, our professions, and the communities we serve. The ANMF is committed to being a constructive, respectful, and generous partner in that endeavour.