

## A profile of primary health care nurses

Web report | Last updated: 12 May 2020 | Topic: [Primary health care](#)

### Primary Health Care Nurses

Primary health care is usually the first point of contact Australians have with the health care system. Primary health care nurses are the largest group of healthcare professionals working in primary health care. In Australia, at least 82,000 nurses work outside of the hospital setting including nurse practitioners, registered nurses, enrolled nurses and registered midwives. This snapshot demonstrates that primary health care nurses are: mostly women, working in a wide range of settings in the primary health care sector, and are highly qualified and experienced.

#### COVID-19

This release covers data up to 31 December 2019, preceding COVID-19.

Cat. no: PHC 2

#### Findings from this report:

- The majority of primary health care nurses were registered nurses (82%), followed by enrolled nurses (9%) in 2019
- The advanced role of nurse immuniser was the most common qualification among primary health care nurses in 2019 (56%)
- Two-thirds of primary health care nurses reported working in general practice settings in 2019 (68%)
- The majority of nurses were women (96%) and aged between 45 and 65 years (60%) in 2019

#### The Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association

The Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association (APNA) is the peak professional body for nurses in primary health care in Australia. They have a large and growing membership that represents primary health care nurses living and working across Australia.

APNA supports the role of primary health care nurses by advancing professional recognition, ensuring workforce sustainability, nurturing leadership in health, and optimising the role of nurses in patient-centred care.

This report summarises data from APNA membership registration, and annual APNA surveys.

#### The APNA Survey

Since 2004, the APNA has commissioned an annual survey which aims to elucidate the wide range of conditions and work-place issues facing primary health care nurses working in Australia. The survey was administered to current and past APNA members and to contacts from a further 60 stakeholder organisations. The AIHW analysis included those respondents who identified as a nurse or a midwife working in primary health care as their primary or secondary place of employment, and excluded those who were working exclusively in the acute hospital setting.

Survey respondents participated from major cities to rural and remote areas across Australia. The survey aims to equip nurses working in primary health care with information on the conditions of their profession (APNA & HPB 2018).

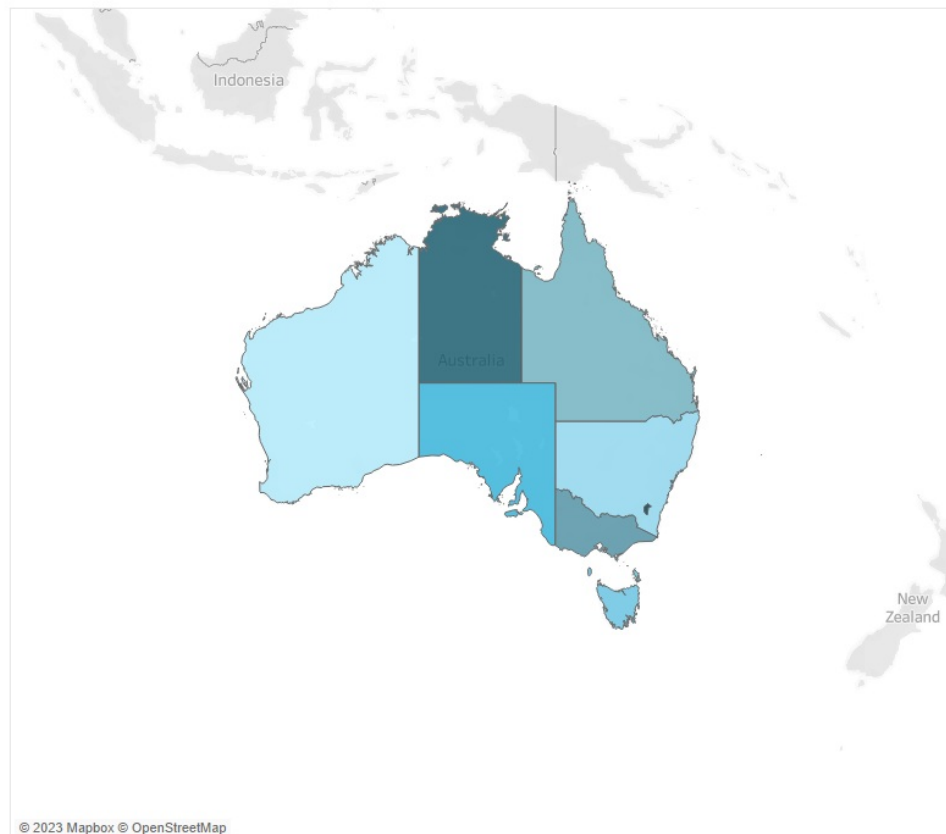
#### Where do primary health care nurses live?

Registered members of APNA represent primary health care nurses living and working across Australia. In 2019, the highest proportion of APNA members lived in New South Wales (33%), Queensland (23%) and Victoria (22%) (Figure 1).

#### Figure 1: APNA membership proportion by state, 2017-2019

Alternative Text for Figure 1: The figure shows APNA membership data for the period 2017-2019. Over the whole period, the majority of APNA members resided in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. In 2019, 33% of members lived in New South Wales, 23% lived in Queensland and 22% lived in Victoria. Only 1% and 2% of members lived in the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2017a, 2018a, 2019a.

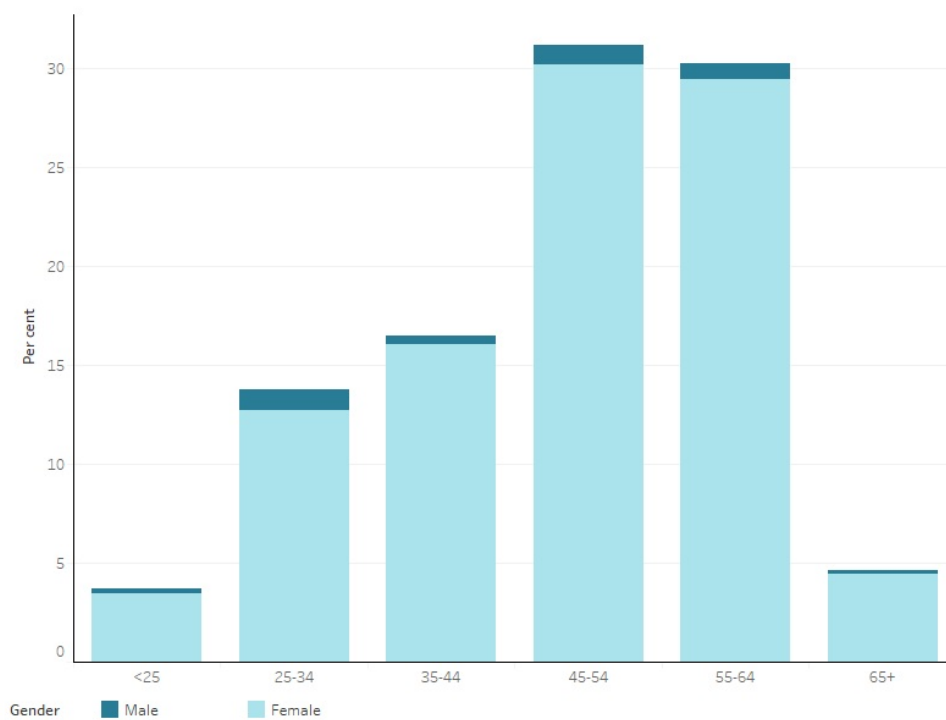
### Who are primary health care nurses?

According to the APNA Survey, 60% of primary health care nurses were aged between 45 and 64 years of age in 2019. The average age in 2019 was 48 years (Figure 2). From 2015-2019, the vast majority of respondents were women, reflecting the high proportion of female nurses in Australia (ACN 2019).

### Figure 2: Gender and age distribution of primary health care nurses, 2015-2019

Alternative Text for Figure 2: The figure shows the age distribution of respondents, by gender between 2015 and 2019. Over this period, the highest proportion of respondents were in the 45 to 64-year age categories. In 2019, 61% of respondents were in the 45 to 64 year age group.

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b.

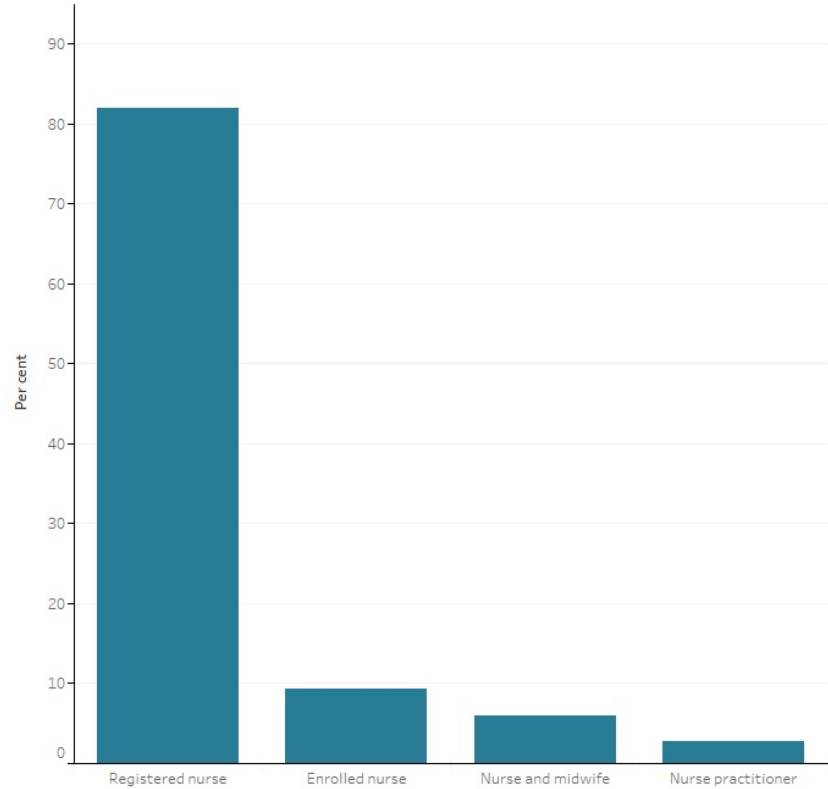
### Most primary health care nurses were registered nurses

Most primary health care nurses were registered nurses (82%), followed by enrolled nurses (9%) in 2019. These proportions were similar across the survey years, between 2015 and 2019 (Figure 3).

#### Figure 3: Registration status of primary health care nurses, 2015-2019

Figure 3 Alternative text: The figure shows the registration status of respondents between 2015 and 2019. The highest proportion of responses within each year were from registered nurses, followed by enrolled nurses, nurses and midwives, and nurse practitioners. In 2019, 82% of respondents were registered nurses, followed by enrolled nurses (9%).

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b

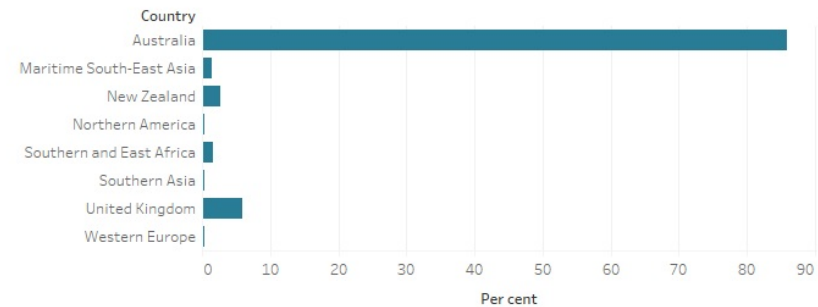
**The majority of primary health care nurses were qualified in Australia**

Almost 9 out of 10 (86%) primary health care nurses received their initial nursing or midwife qualification in Australia in the 2019 survey. In this same year, 14% of nurses reported first qualifying outside of Australia, reflecting the diverse background of the nursing profession (Ohr, Brazil & Holm 2018). For those whose initial qualification was obtained outside Australia, the highest proportion occurred in the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Country group of first qualification as a nurse/midwife among primary health care nurses, 2016-2019**

Figure 4 Alternative Text: The figure shows the top 6 country groups (minor) where respondents completed their first qualification, between 2016 and 2019. Over this period, Australia was the highest country group, followed by the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

Choose year:  
2019



Note:  
1. Location is classified according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Standard Australian Classification of Countries (SACC) minor country groups.

Sources: ABS 2016, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b

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## Where do primary health care nurses work?

Primary health care is usually the first point of contact Australians have with the health care system. Primary health care nurses are the largest group of healthcare professionals working in primary health care. In Australia, at least 82,000 nurses work outside of the hospital setting including nurse practitioners, registered nurses, enrolled nurses and registered midwives. This snapshot demonstrates that primary health care nurses are: mostly women, working in a wide range of settings in the primary health care sector, and are highly qualified and experienced.

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Primary health care nurses play a key role in health care and work in a variety of settings including general practice clinics and community health services.

The APNA Survey results show that:

- general practice settings were the top primary place of employment for primary health care nurses between 2015 and 2019, with 2 out of 3 (68%) of survey respondents reporting they primarily worked in a general practice setting in 2019
- following general practices, 'other' (2%), community health (3%), community acute health (3%), Primary Health Network (3%) and Aboriginal health (3%) were the most popular place of primary employment in 2019
- acute hospital settings were the top secondary place of employment for survey respondents in 2019
- general practice settings remained in the top three place of secondary employment between 2015 and 2019 (Figure 5).

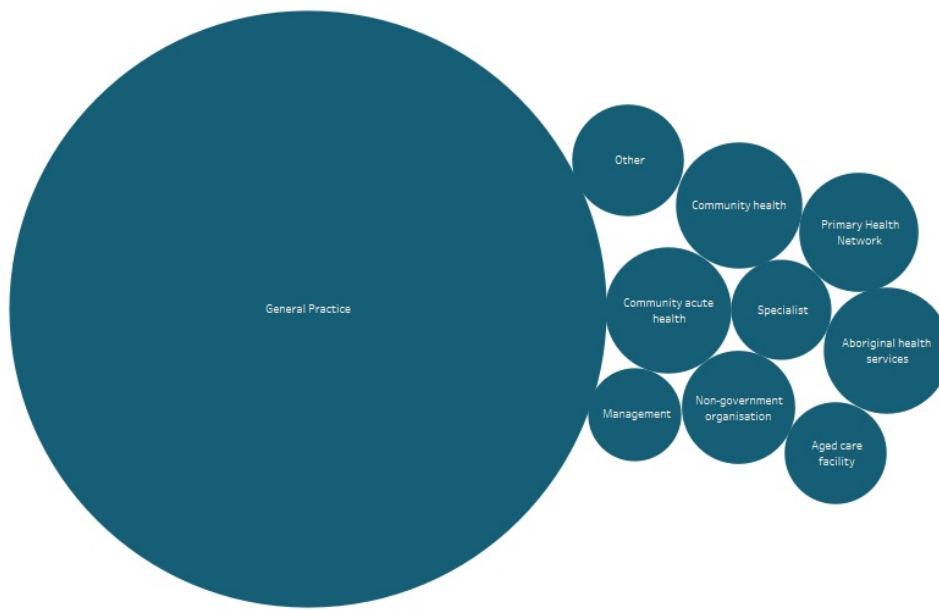
### Figure 5: Primary and secondary places of employment among primary health care nurses, 2015-2019

Figure 5 Alternative text: The figure shows the top ten primary and secondary places of employment of the APNA Survey respondents between 2015 and 2019. Over this period, GP settings accounted for the highest proportion of survey respondents' primary place of employment, 68% in 2019. In 2019, 16.8% of respondents worked in acute hospital settings as a secondary place of employment.

### Findings from this report:

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- Two-thirds of primary health care nurses reported working in general practice settings in 2019 (68%)
- The majority of nurses were women (96%) and aged between 45 and 65 years (60%) in 2019

Choose employment type:  
Primary employment



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b

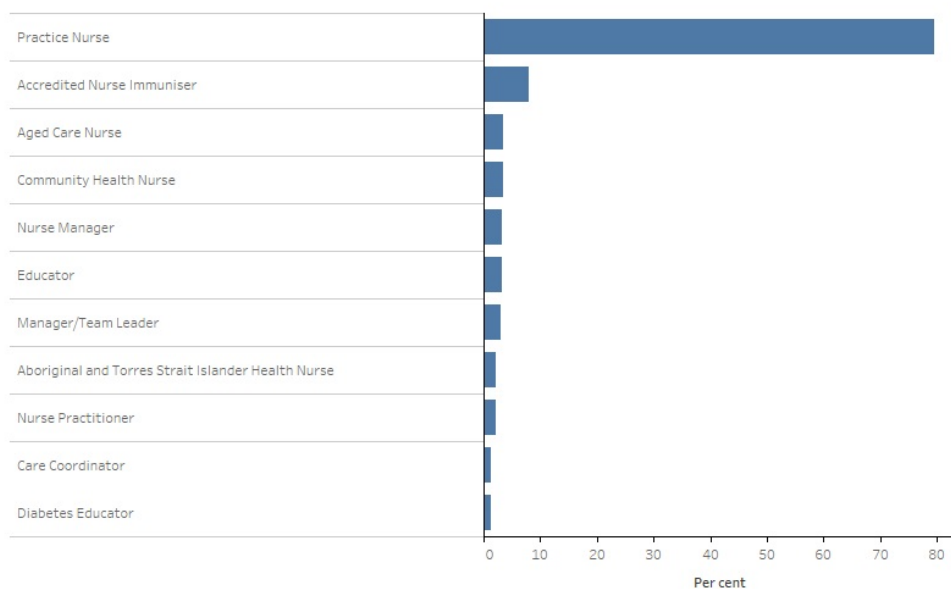
### What roles do primary health care nurses work in?

Primary health care nurses work in a wide range of roles including practice nurses, nurse educators, aged care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health nurses. Between 2017 and 2019, practice nurses accounted for the largest proportion of primary health care nurses. In 2019, 79% of nurses worked as practice nurses, 8.1% were accredited nurse immunisers and 3.5% were aged care nurses (Figure 6).

### Figure 6: Workplace roles among primary health care nurses, 2017-2019

Figure 6 Alternative text: The figure shows the top ten APNA member positions between 2017 and 2019. Over this period, the highest proportion of members worked as practice nurses. The top three positions of APNA members in both 2018 and 2019 were practice nurses, accredited nurse immunisers and aged care nurses.

Choose year:  
2019



Source: APNA 2017a, 2018a, 2019a

### Direct patient care is the most common role among primary health care nurses

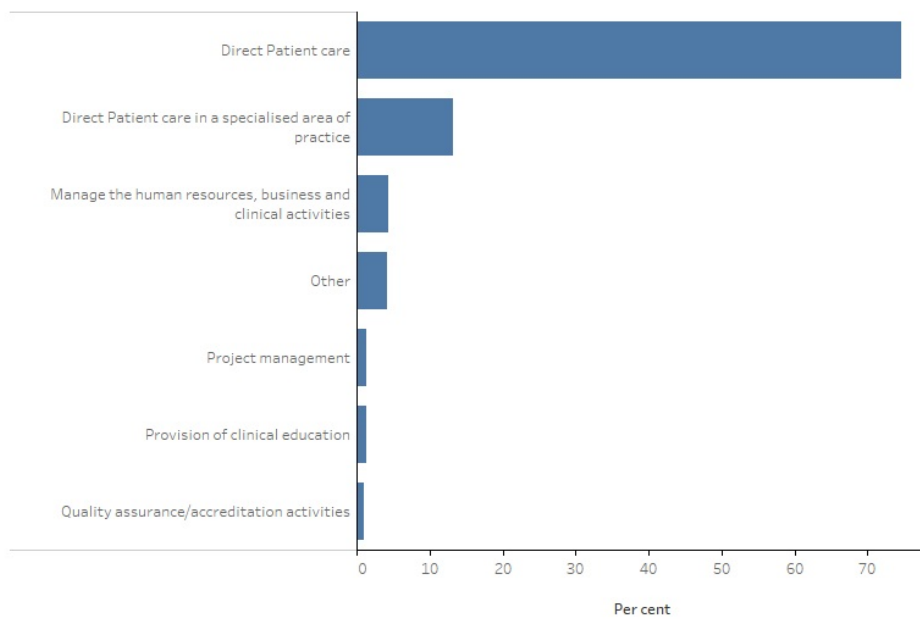
Primary health care nurses play a key role in delivering continuity of care to patients and improving health outcomes (APNA, 2020b). In 2018, 3 in 4 (75%) survey respondents reported that their main role or focus in their role was direct patient care (Figure 7).

#### Figure 7: Main role among primary health care nurses, 2015-2018

Figure 7 Alternative text: This figure shows the proportion of survey respondents describing the main focus of their role in the primary job between 2015 and 2018. In 2018, 3 in 4 respondents (75%) stated that their main focus in their primary setting was direct patient care.



Choose year:  
2018



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b.

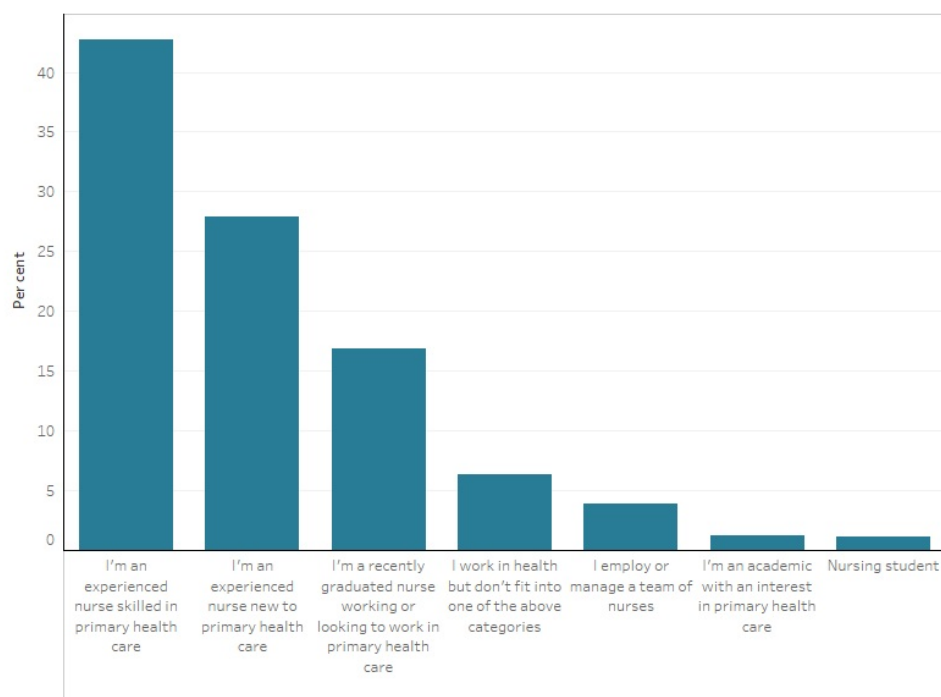
### Primary health care nurses report career experience

APNA member registration data show a large proportion of primary health care nurses self-reported being 'experienced'. Over 2 out of 5 nurses (43%) reported being 'an experienced nurse in primary health care'. Over a quarter (28%) reported being 'an experienced nurse new to primary health care' (Figure 8).

### Figure 8: Career stage of primary health care nurses, 2017-2019

Figure 8 Alternative text: The figure shows the stage of career of APNA members between 2017 and 2019. Over this period, the highest proportion of respondents were from the experienced nurses skilled or new to primary health care categories. In 2019, 71% of respondents were from these categories.

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2017b, 2018a, APNA 2019a

### Job flexibility is important to primary health care nurses

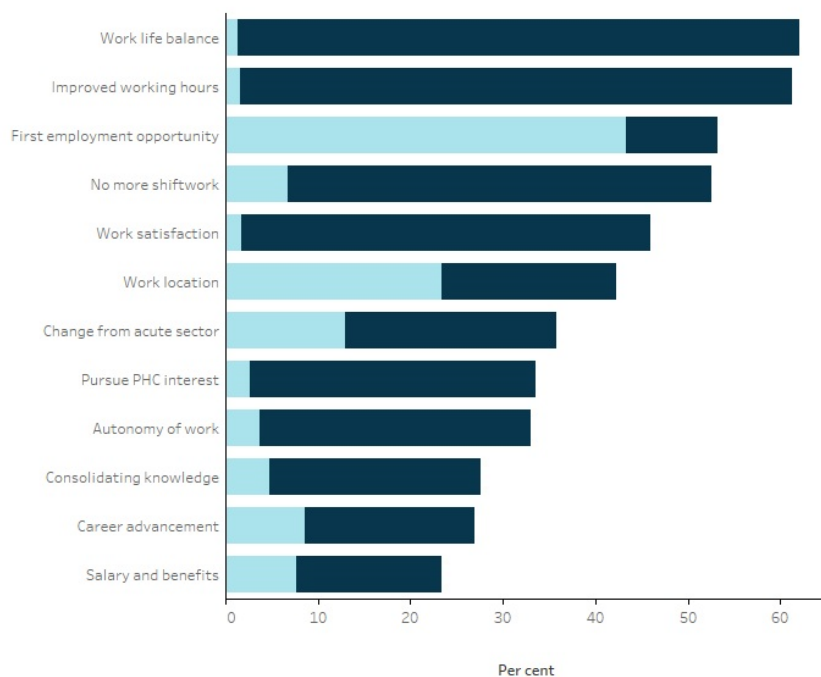
Between 2015 and 2019, the top three most important factors which influenced a nurse's decision to work in primary health care included: improved working hours, ability to balance life and work responsibilities, and ability to stop working shift work. The least important factor across all survey years was the 'first employment opportunity'.

In 2019, almost two-thirds (61%) of survey respondents reported having the ability to balance life and work responsibilities was a 'very important' factor in influencing their decision to become a primary health care nurse or midwife (Figure 9).

### Figure 9: Factors influencing decision to become a primary health care nurse/midwife, 2015-2019

Figure 9 Alternative text: The figure shows the proportion of respondents votes against a range of factors that influenced their decision to become a primary health care nurse/midwife between 2015 and 2019. In 2019, the ability to balance life and work responsibilities and improved working hours was voted very important by respondents, 61% and 59% respectively.

Choose year:  
2019



Unimportant Very important

Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b.

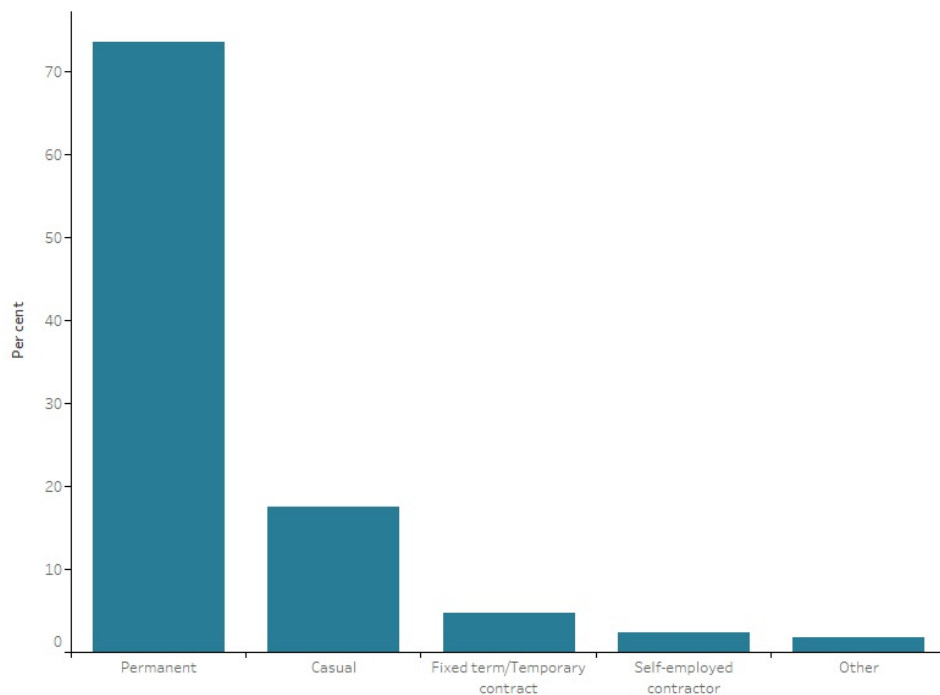
### Most primary health care nurses have permanent positions

In 2019, over 7 in 10 (74%) of primary health care nurses reported working on a permanent basis in their primary place of employment, and almost 1 in 5 report working on a casual basis (18%).

### Figure 10: Employment status of primary health care nurses in their primary place of employment, 2015-2019

Figure 10 Alternative text: This figure shows the proportion distribution of survey respondents employment basis in their primary job setting between 2015 and 2019. In 2019, 74% of respondents reported they were employed on a permanent basis whilst 18% reported they were employed on a casual basis.

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b

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Australian Primary Health Care Nurse Association (APNA) 2017a. APNA Annual Report 2018. Melbourne: APNA.

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## What qualifications do primary health nurses have?

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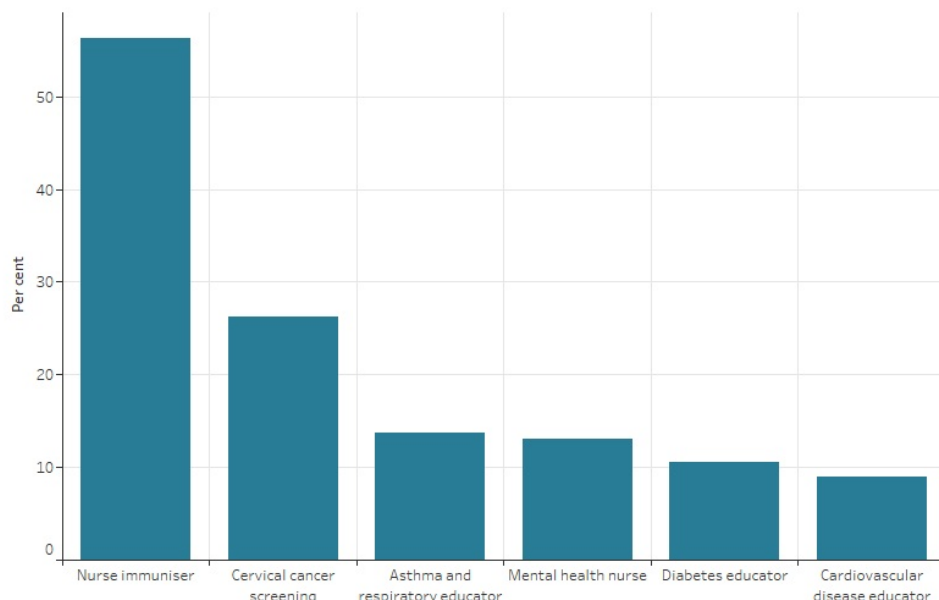
Nurses are highly educated and qualified. According to the APNA Survey, the majority of primary health care nurses were registered nurses – a qualification requiring a Bachelor's or Master's degree in nursing. Enrolled nurses require a Diploma of nursing (NSW Government 2020).

Building on their formal education, nurses are additionally qualified to practice in a variety of advanced roles (Schwartz 2019). Between 2015 and 2019, common qualifications among the primary health care nurses included nurse immuniser, cervical cancer screening, asthma, respiratory, and diabetes educators (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Education attained or working towards among primary health care nurses, 2015-2019**

Figure 11 Alternative text: The figure shows qualifications either obtained or working towards, among the APNA Survey respondents between 2015-2019. Across all years, nurse immuniser, cervical cancer screening, asthma and respiratory educator and diabetes educator were the most common qualifications. In 2019, 56% of respondents had or were working towards qualifications as a nurse immuniser, followed by cervical cancer screening (26%), asthma and respiratory educator (14%) and diabetes educator (13%).

Choose year:  
2019



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b.

### More than a third of primary health care nurses have postgraduate qualifications

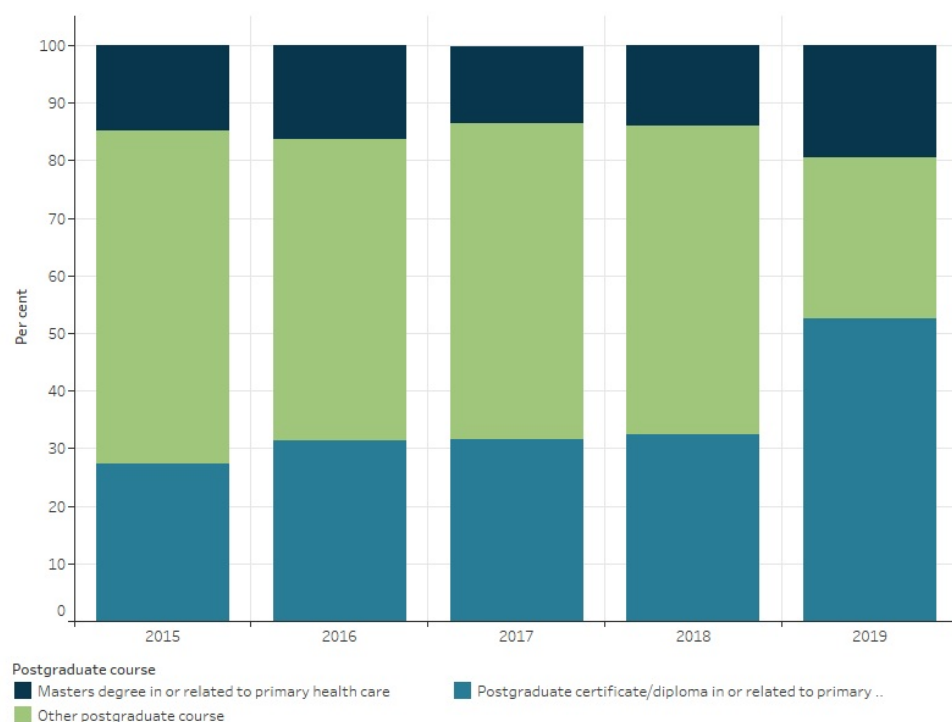
There are a wide range of postgraduate diplomas and master's degrees in nursing, allowing registered nurses to become highly skilled specialists in a variety of nursing areas (Schwartz 2019).

According to the APNA Survey, almost half (42%) of the respondents reported completing or working towards a postgraduate qualification in 2019. Of these, over half (53%) stated their postgraduate course was a certificate or diploma in or related to primary health care, followed by 'other postgraduate course' (28%) and master's degree in or related to primary health care (19%) (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Postgraduate courses completed or working towards among primary health care nurses, 2015-2019**

Figure 12 Alternative text: This figure shows the type of postgraduate courses, either obtained or working towards, among the APNA Survey respondents between 2015-2019. Across all years, most respondents had or were working towards a postgraduate certificate/diploma in or related to primary health care (primary health care), followed by 'other postgraduate course' and Master's degree in or related to primary health care. In 2019, half (53%) stated their postgraduate course was a certificate or diploma in or related to primary health care, followed by 'other postgraduate course' (28%) and master's degree in or related to primary health care (19%).

Choose postgraduate course:  
All



Sources: APNA 2015, 2016, 2017b, 2018b, 2019b.

## References

Australian Primary Health Care Nurse Association (APNA) 2017a. APNA Annual Report 2018. Melbourne: APNA.

APNA 2018a. APNA Annual Report 2018. Melbourne: APNA.

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## Technical notes

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This snapshot analyses results from the annual APNA Survey, from 2015-2019. These results included the responses from current and past APNA members. In addition, APNA invited about 60 stakeholder organisations to participate in the Survey, and responses from individuals within these organisations were included.

AIHW analysis of the Survey excluded the following respondents:

- respondents who answered no to “are you a nurse and/or midwife currently employed in primary health care?”
- respondents who did not answer the first 10 mandatory questions in the ‘about you’ section
- respondents who reported acute hospital as their primary place of employment and no other secondary place of employment.

While the results of this Survey from a non-representative sample provide a snapshot of APNA primary health care nurses in Australia, there are insufficient data to provide reliable and robust estimates of what is occurring regionally and nationally. The results of this survey should not be interpreted as representative of all primary health care nurses in Australia.

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## Data

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## Related material

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## Resources

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