

CEO COMMENTARY

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A health check on our health system surviving

Walter Kmet – CEO WentWest, featured article in the HealthTimes:

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A health check on our health system - surviving change

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The Australian health and human services sector is a complex and rapidly growing industry of tremendous scale.

Nearly three times larger than the global banking industry, it faces increasing pressure from a growing aging population and the ramifications of a workforce unprepared to deal with the demand.

According to the Government's Productivity Commission, Australia's population is set to rise to around 38 million by 2060, and in the same timeframe, more than 14 people out of every 100 will be aged over 75. Furthermore, by 2020, 70 per cent of Australia will have health issues associated with chronic disease.

In their report, 'Australian Jobs', Deloitte stated the health care and social assistance is Australia's largest employing industry. The industry's 1.4 million workers account for 12 per cent of the national employment figure and the largest employing industry in regional Australia, with around 442,600 jobs.

Further to that, SEEK's recent reports say there will be more than 258,000 new healthcare and medical jobs created by 2019.

It's an ongoing discussion and debate in many corners of the political and commercial arenas. The healthcare challenge will not be going away any time soon. So how do we prepare for the significant change facing this enormous industry that influences everyone in society?



A devoted workforce unprepared

As with any industry, the core fabric is the workforce behind it and the team that leads it.

A scalable workforce of appropriately qualified and skilled professionals is crucial to meet the demands of the industry's changing landscape.

Dr Frances Peart, a nurse of more than 20 years, said the last time all stakeholders discussed large-scale health workforce redesign was during former Prime Minister Paul Keating's days when healthcare leaders across Australia were consulted and national reforms were implemented.

"It is widely recognised that there are a number of inequities in relation to the workforce and that these issues must be addressed for our health system to be able to respond to the burgeoning aging population," Dr Peart said.

"The health workforce is not a homogenous entity and solutions need to be crafted that address the particular concerns of disciplines and groups.

"For example, nurses are reluctant to step up to management roles due to the lack of incentives, there is disproportionate access to skilled health practitioners in regional and remote areas and there is a gap in services in relation to generalist patient-centric roles.

"With advances in technology and medical science, there has been a tendency for health professionals to become more specialised.

"Clearly, this has resulted in better patient outcomes, however, as this segmentation continues, people accessing health care will require assistance with coordination of primary and tertiary care, and there will be a need for health professionals who can span the breadth of the health system and provide a patient-centred service."

In November 2014, a survey by the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Committee (CSHISC) highlighted some key areas of concern with regards to the workforce within the health industry.

The majority of those surveyed found that there is, or will be, a lack of a competency-based workforce that is productive, incentivised and customer-centric to keep up with the growth of this industry. Furthermore, the number of qualified and experienced staff to meet the demand will become woefully inadequate.

WentWest, the Western Sydney Primary HealthNetwork (WPHN) is a leading primary health network located in western Sydney. They work in partnership with doctors, allied health

professionals and local health districts.

WPHN's CEO Walter Kmet said the industry needs to consider how increases in demand for health services can be satisfied through well thought-out workforce strategies.

"The health industry is largely about people, and as such, workforce issues cannot be ignored. Workforce capacity and capability, and innovation and change management are all areas of focus," Mr Kmet said.

"We need to ensure workforces are effectively engaged and meeting needs as they change over time. Identifying the role of teams and how they operate in primary care, as well as ensuring that team members practise at the 'top of their licence', are important developmental opportunities."

Opportunity in innovation

Despite concerns about the workforce's readiness to manage the upcoming changes, there is a significant opportunity for the Australian health industry to leverage innovation within the research community and take a prominent global role in healthcare innovation.

According to CEDA's 2015 report *Australia's Future Workforce?*, Australia has a reputation of world-leading researchers and developing medical technologies, devices and pharmaceutical goods. This is partly due to the world of academia and the private sector rallying for the need, demand and, of course, the commercial opportunities in addressing problems that we share with the majority of nations around the world.

It's easy to see that we have a complex system that is tired and becoming increasingly costly and inefficient. On the one hand, we have a workforce that needs upskilling and realignment to meet the challenge. On the other, a research community capable of leveraging commercial opportunities in tackling global and domestic issues and delivering ongoing healthcare innovation.

Mr Kmet said the industry needs to work on forming productive relationships and alliances to ensure effective delivery of cost-effective services that are focused on consumers' needs.

"Health is a challenging business and the complexity of patient conditions and technologies emerging is increasing this complexity," Mr Kmet said.

"The potential for duplication and waste as a result of a disconnected health system working in silos is greater than ever.

"Workforce capability and capacity building to deal with these and other challenges, will be

critical if the system is able to respond effectively.”

We understand the challenges that will influence the success and failure of the system, but key stakeholders have yet to reach consensus on the solutions that will ensure the health industry’s growth is supported.

So how do we prepare for these challenges?

Simply put, we need leaders to champion this change.

We have a devoted workforce loyal to its cause and a vested community that cares and demands change. We have the intellectual property and technology to justify Australia’s strategic position as a global thought leader in health, but we need leaders to translate this into addressing the growth needs of the industry.

Leaders to rally and articulate in layman terms the needs of the sector and drive a vision that will inspire stakeholders to mobilise a stronger workforce. It is a cohort of individuals that will shape a health and human services system for generations to come.

But does the sector have these leaders?

According to the same CSHISC survey, just under half of all respondents implied that the workforce did not have the management and leadership capability required.

From our position in the industry – as recruitment and human resources specialists – we know there are some incredible executives in health and human services, many of whom are truly unsung heroes and whose voices are often lost in the white noise of a complex bureaucratic health system. This is particularly prevalent within human services, such as disability or aged care, where concerns are often diluted or dwarfed by the boarder issues in health.

If Australia’s health and human services is to have any chance of dealing with the huge challenges and, importantly, ensure change is sustainable, today’s leaders need to be the benchmark for their future prodigies.

We need leaders to drive organisations to become agile, adaptive, innovative and commercially savvy. They need to navigate their employees through the cultural and organisational change so they can be the beneficiaries of a newly energised commercial market.

Or at the very least, they need to ensure the sector’s survival.

By David Wilson – [Davidson Executive](#)



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About WentWest

WentWest was established in 2002 to provide the Australian General Practice Training (AGPT) program for general practice vocational training in western Sydney. WentWest has a team of experienced medical educators who are all in active general practice and assist registered doctors to become vocationally registered general practitioners.

WentWest's focus on providing better health care in the community was strengthened with its appointment as a Tranche 1 Medicare Local in July 2011 to now operating as the Primary Health Network. WentWest has built on its experience as a Division of General Practice in supporting GPs and their practices, connecting health services to meet local needs, and striving for better health outcomes for western Sydney.

The population living in western Sydney is culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse, and we also have the largest urban Aboriginal community in Australia. WentWest works closely with doctors, allied health professionals, the Local Health District and many others to improve the coordination of local health and human services for these patients and their families.

WentWest has partnered with the Western Sydney Local Health District and the Aboriginal Medical Service Western Sydney to address the common health priorities within the region through joint planning, capacity building, programs and strategies. This work is critical to building a better primary health care system that the evidence shows is fundamental if we are to reduce this burden of disease and keep people out of hospital.