



## **AASW Inclusion of social workers in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) will better protect the public**

**The AASW is calling for social work to be included in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS).**

Poor social work practice has been responsible for serious harm, including physical and sexual abuse. In many cases the perpetrators of this harm have been allowed to continue practicing.

### **The risk of poor practice**

The level of trust and power invested in social workers combined with the vulnerability of their client group puts the social work profession in a high risk category for harm.

Despite best attempts, voluntary self-regulation has failed to protect the public. Social workers who fail to meet minimum practice standards and breach ethical frameworks continue to practice without sanctions or limitations. Voluntary self-regulation has no jurisdiction over the clients of the majority of social workers who choose not to belong to their professional association.

New South Wales (with South Australia to follow in 2012) is the only Australian state with legislation to protect the public against unethical or substandard practice amongst unregistered health practitioners, including social workers. In all other states and territories, social workers who have performed unethically, and even those who have harmed clients, are free to continue to operate within our community across Australia, usually without redress or any additional checks and controls.

Unfortunately the NSW legislation fails to include a remedy for poor practice. With Australia's workforce shortages, it is imperative that regulation includes ways to improve practice not ignore or expel those who could improve.

### **Social Work meets the six criteria for inclusion in NRAS.**

- As a profession which is focused on the health and wellbeing of Australians, social work fits precisely within the Health Ministers' portfolio.
- The level of trust and power invested in social workers combined with the vulnerability of their client group puts the profession in a high risk category for harm.
- Despite best attempts, voluntary self-regulation has failed to protect the public. Social workers who fail to meet minimum practice standards and breach ethical frameworks continue to practice without sanctions or limitations. Self-regulation offers no redress for harmed clients or protection for vulnerable clients.
- The social work profession is a well-defined occupation, with an established body of knowledge and a clear national entry-level qualification widely accepted across jurisdictions.
- National regulation is a goal towards which social workers have advocated for decades. The profession is ready and has the capacity to embrace the Scheme and abide by the processes of Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA).
- If no change is made to the status quo, the most vulnerable Australians will continue to be at risk of sub-standard, unethical and unqualified practice by 'rogue' practitioners.

The AASW is the national association for Australian Social Workers with 7,000 members. For over 60 years it has set national standards for education, professional development and for quality and ethical practice for the

### Quick Facts

- As the largest public sector allied health profession in the country, social work fits squarely within the Health Ministers' portfolio.
- Social work is the only profession working in Mental Health which is not registered yet it comprises the second largest grouping after nursing.
- Social workers see approximately 500,000 people every year in direct practice in public, private and community settings. Many social work clients are the most vulnerable and marginalized in our communities.
- Only 1/3 of social workers are members of their professional association. There are approximately 21,000 social workers in Australia and an extra 1,200 graduate each year.
- Social workers have been found to have acted unprofessionally in a number of significant public inquiries over many years. For example The 1988-90 Royal Commission (The Chelmsford Inquiry) into Deep Sleep Therapy; the 1997 Wood Commission in NSW; various coronial inquests across Australia into the death of a child or children; the 2008 Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales; the 2010 Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Northern Territory's Child Protection System.
- Social work is a registered health profession in most first world countries.

profession. But without national registration the public, particularly when most vulnerable, are at risk from the very real harm that poor social work practice can cause. The profession is ready to embrace a national regulatory framework for the benefit of our clients and the Australian community.

### **The Australian public seems to consider the profession to be registered.**

91% of respondents<sup>1</sup> believed that a social worker, counsellor or therapist could be struck off or banned from practicing. This is clearly not the case without registration.

63% of respondents believe that a tertiary qualification is required for practice as a social worker, counsellor or therapist. In fact as there is no 'protection of title', many people have been called social workers when they aren't qualified as such. Regulating the list of approved courses and protection of title would assist the public in better understanding the profession. The public perception is increasingly out of step with reality.

87% believed that all social workers have to complete professional development each year. In fact, unless required by their employer, no such requirement exists for the majority of social workers who choose not to join their professional association.

Further, the public appears unclear about how to make a complaint against a therapist, counsellor or social worker.

### **Australia is now out of step with comparable countries**

Many countries have recognized the dangers to the public and have now moved to regulate the social work profession. These include the USA, New Zealand, the UK, Ireland and Canada. Australia is now out of step with most comparable countries.

### **Policy Call**

*In the best interests of our most vulnerable citizens, the*

*Australian Health Ministers determine that a regulatory impact statement for the inclusion of social workers in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme is carried out with a view to social workers' inclusion by 2015.*

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<sup>1</sup> Roy Morgan 'CATIBUS' survey carried out in March 2011 on behalf of the AASW.