



Western Health

Workforce Recovery Plan
March 2022

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Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, like other public health services, Western Health implemented surge models of care in response to unprecedented demand coupled with high numbers of furloughed staff and personal leave especially through the Delta and Omicron waves.

Western Health had developed a Workforce Surge Plan in 2020, and had worked over an extended period of time through that year to prepare our staff for the potential impact of a surge. We had proactively worked with our teams to educate them, up-skill and ready our teams in case this occurred. When the Department of Health released the *COVID-19 acute care surge workforce delivery models* there were strong synergies with the Western Health plan, and we adapted our plan to ensure alignment.

Melbourne's West has been particularly hard hit by COVID in 2020 and 2021, and Western Health has been at the forefront with large COVID demand being managed by our teams. We have also supported large numbers of outbreaks in external locations including Residential Aged Care Facilities. Western Health has also had the added responsibilities of being a Local Public Health Unit and the COVID Vaccination Hub lead for the western metropolitan region.

Western Health has recognised that our clinical and non-clinical staff across all settings have been under extreme pressure, and proactive strategies have been put in place throughout the entire period to ensure that we care for our staff, so that they are retained as much as possible as we emerge from this difficult period. The wellbeing and safety of our staff is a core priority for Western Health, and this priority has been at the forefront of all our decisions since COVID emerged in 2019 and we commenced our own planning in late January 2020.

Whilst COVID related pressure on health services may reduce, there is always pressures in healthcare on the workforce and the return to 'business as normal' will bring with it new challenges.

Western Health is a rapidly growing health service and proactive workforce management, maintaining a positive workplace culture and ensuring we are an employer of choice is central to us delivering high quality health services in an environment where our services are expected to almost double in size over the coming 6 years.

Western Health has been deliberate in our strategies and forward planning which have held us in good stead for our staff and services to emerge from COVID peak in a healthy position. We have been able to return to non-surge workforce arrangements in February 2022 despite additional services and beds opening in March 2022, which is a testament to this.

Western Health's Workforce Recovery Plan outlines a concise synopsis of the strategies that the health service has in place to support the recovery of our people. Western Health will continue to adapt and evolve our strategies, and where helpful will take on board ideas from the Department of Health and other services.

Safe and sustainable staffing

Workforce Surge Models in place during COVID peak

Western Health had formal workforce surge models in place during the COVID peak periods. These arrangements aligned with the Department of Health's *COVID-19 acute care surge workforce delivery models* guidance which was centrally developed and negotiated with peak bodies and industrial groups including the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation (Victorian Branch).

Western Health's workforce surge models were implemented due to the demand for care exhausting workforce supply, largely due to staff furlough numbers and high personal leave rates. In summary the models implemented included:

Intensive Care Units (ICUs):

From 12 October 2021 until 28 February 2022 both of Western Health's ICUs at Sunshine Hospital and Footscray Hospital had the ICU Surge Workforce model implemented and functioning.

This involved a 1:2 ratio being in place for our critical care nurses, with them working in a team based model with 1:2 non-critical care registered nurses, who have been redeployed from other Western Health departments/wards. These non-critical care registered nurses had received specific training, education and support to ensure that they were able to safely and effectively work within the ICU environment.

Acute and subacute wards:

From Tuesday 11 January 2022 until 28 February 2022, Western Health's acute and subacute wards (excluding our COVID wards and Coronary Care Unit beds) implemented Stage 3 (Extreme surge) arrangements of the Acute Surge workforce model across all of our sites. All of Western Health's wards moved to extended team based models, whereby where necessary and a nurse is not available to fill a nursing vacancy, one of the ward's Registered Undergraduate Students of Nursing (RUSONs) was included within the team numbers.

All non-essential services were paused during this time, and active redeployment of staff from all disciplines occurred to maintain safety, equity and service delivery.

Prior to the implementation of Surge 3, Western Health had worked with our teams for months preparing for extended team based models in case this was required. All roles worked to their position description and scope of practice, and delegation and supervision principles were utilised to ensure care was safe and that all staff were supported.

The implementation of the Surge 3 arrangements and extended team-based models was only implemented on a shift-by-shift basis when it was required. Throughout the entirety of the COVID peak period Western Health maintained nurse-to-patient ratios as specified within the *Safe Patient Care (Nurse to Patient and Midwife to Patient Ratios) Act 2015* (the Act) wherever possible.

Maternity:

From 29 November until 9 January 2022 Western Health's post-natal maternity departments had Stage 3 (Extreme surge) arrangements of the Acute Surge workforce model. Our post-natal wards moved to extended team based models, whereby Registered Nurses (RNs) worked under a Midwifery-led model within their normal scope of practice. This allowed Western Health to

allocate midwives to Birthing and Maternity Assessment Centres to maintain the safe care of women and babies. Western Health also tried to redeploy Maternity Group Practice midwives wherever possible.

From 10 January 2022 until 28 February 2022 Western Health proactively moved to Stage 4 (Acute Care) in our COVID Surge workforce model, due to high furlough numbers and also a very high number of booked births for February and March 2022.

This allowed for Western Health to engage with Safer Care Victoria and local councils to access time-limited support of Maternal Child Health services to support the large number of furloughed staff, as well as a significant increase in COVID positive women.

Throughout the COVID peak period, Western Health continued to meet nurse and midwife-to-patient ratios within all maternity services as specified within the Act.

Home based and Community Services:

From 12 October 2021 until 28 February 2022 Western Health's Home based and Community Services progressively moved to Stage 3 (Extreme surge) of the Western Health's Surge Workforce Plan across all of our sites. These services moved to extended team based models, whereby where support roles are working with clinicians to allow each clinician to work at top of scope, to help provide services to the significant growth in COVID positive pathways and Western@Home and HITH services.

These areas are not subject to ratios in the Act.

Immediate Cessation of Surge Models

Western Health ceased utilising workforce surge models on 28 February 2022. Prior to this date Western Health had been meeting the requirements of the Act for a number of weeks, however officially reverted back to business as usual workforce models once we had confidence that the requirements of the Act could be reliably and sustainably met.

Western Health continues to maintain a Registered Nurse each shift to support the midwives in our post-natal maternity wards, maintaining the requirements of the Act for our maternity departments.

Fixed term employment of Maternal Child Health nurses into domiciliary care continues as well to free up our midwives to work in other departments. This is expected to cease during March 2022.

Ongoing staffing approaches

Over February 2022 Western Health progressively returned all redeployed staff to their core roles so that services are delivered by staff with suitable qualifications and/or experience.

Extensive recruitment occurred within the following areas over many months:

- Acute and/or sub-acute wards
- Medical/surgical services
- Maternity services.
- Allied Health

In our critical care and specialist areas fully subsidised post-graduate course places have been offered to recruit large numbers of new employees within the following areas to be able to meet ongoing service demands and planned growth:

- Emergency departments

- Critical care

Many redeployed staff chose to enrol in Western Health's Discovery programs or post-graduate courses to allow them to continue to work within their redeployed area beyond the surge period.

Staffing strategies put in place by Western Health over 2020 and 2021 have held us in good stead, so by the end of March 2022 only minimal vacancy remains despite planned growth of our services and beds. This has included:

- **West Metro Graduate Program:** whereby an additional 270 early career nurses were employed as part of the COVID Vaccination program. These new nurses were given a formal graduate program, which included formal learning and supported rotations to other clinical departments to allow them to be permanently employed in 2022. To increase the scale of the program, service level agreements were entered into with the Royal Women's Hospital, Royal Children's Hospital and Werribee Mercy Hospital with some West Metro graduate nurses rotating to these health services to gain clinical experience.
- **Increased 2022 graduate intake:** This year Western Health is welcoming 307 new nursing and midwifery graduates to our team, a significant increase on previous years.
- **Active local, interstate and overseas recruitment:** Western Health has active recruitment campaigns and incentive programs in place to attract staff from interstate and overseas, with a focus on maternity, emergency nursing and medical staff.
- **Development of interactive online learning:** Western Health developed a large number of online learning modules that supported redeployed staff to actively up-skill at their own pace, as well as supporting ward-based staff to up-skill to confidently care for higher acuity patients. These packages will be utilised to maintain the skills of staff who have worked in roles which may be required in event of a future surge, including emergency departments, critical care, COVID wards, non-invasive ventilation, acutely unwell patients, PPE Spotting, contact tracing and specific COVID related skills.

These strategies build on foundational components that have been implemented over the past 4 years to ensure that Western Health is proactively planning and managing our workforce, including:

- **Centralised recruitment** processes for all clinical nursing and midwifery positions, which has optimised candidate management, decreased vacancy lag-time and reduced administrative burden on our Unit Managers
- **Forward planning coverage of roster vacancies** when rosters published, which has significantly reduced agency usage.
- **Leadership Development programs** in place for Associate Unit Managers, Unit Managers, Clinical Educators, Clinical Nurse/Midwifery Consultants and Nurse Practitioners. Our Working Together project also increased Unit Manager skills in co-design, critical thinking, change management and proactive leadership.
- **Post-graduate Midwifery Employment model** is in place, and has been an important pipeline for our midwifery workforce. Western Health has progressively increased the number of participants each year.
- **Refresher programs** are in place for nurses and midwives.
- **Learning pathways** are in place with Discovery programs and generous post-graduate scholarships

- **Revitalised clinical education model**, enhancing bedside learning opportunities, Clinical Educator presence and supporting increased undergraduate student placement numbers
- **Team-based models** supported by enhanced delegation and supervision knowledge to make the workload of nurses and midwives achievable and support the transfer of knowledge and experience from experts to novices.
- **Utilisation of strategic workforce software** with detailed profiling, planning, forecasting, modelling, tracking of staff utilisation, enhancement of supplementary staff management and real-time reporting.
- **Quarterly meetings with all feeder universities** occurs to increase collaboration, actively work on mutually beneficial strategic priorities, enhance undergraduate and post-graduate access and outcomes and influence decisions. Western Health has membership on key committees for our main feeder universities, including curriculum development.
- **Enrolled Nurse early career** program is actively run each year, and whilst small this program has increased in size each year over the past 3 years.

Bed capacity and status:

From early March most of Western Health's beds were re-opened, and our staffing status supports this occurring without any surge models being in place. We currently retain 2 COVID and SCOVID wards – 1 on each main site.

As previously mentioned, Western Health is a rapidly growing health service. The opening of additional areas which were delayed due to COVID peak will occur in early March, including:

- new areas of the Sunshine Hospital Emergency Department,
- a new 24-bed Rapid Assessment and Discharge Unit (RADU) will open on Ward 2G Sunshine,
- a Transit Lounge area at Sunshine Hospital.

Western Health has been actively recruiting for these new departments and are confident that all requirements under the Act will be met or new capacity will not be brought on line.

Recommencement of elective surgery:

Staged recommencement of elective surgery was planned to allow for staff to have a break between redeployment and recommencing their core role:

- on 28 February at Footscray Hospital in limited numbers
- on 28 February 2022 at Bacchus Marsh Hospital in full numbers
- on 15 March at Williamstown Hospital
- Sunbury Day Hospital recommencement has yet to be finalised.

Rebuilding training and career pathways

Western Health has a robust Workforce Plan that has put in a number of strategies over the past 3 years that supports and enhances career pathways of all levels and experience across the workforce.

Clinical placements

Over many years Western Health has actively increased our number of undergraduate student placements across all disciplines.

Fellowship models are in place with Deakin University and Victoria University, and planning is underway for this to be introduced with other universities too. There is a specific Midwifery Fellowship position for an undergraduate student that identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander that rotates to the Galinjera program as part of Midwifery Group Practice.

Western Health has been actively working with our university partners to enhance the provision of clinical placements during COVID, so recovery is not required in this area.

Transition to practice

Western Health has increased the number of early career health professionals participating in our transition to practice programs each year, with a significant increase in 2021 and 2022.

Our transition to practice programs in 2021 and 2022 have been adapted to include skill stations, pre-program learning and additional support in recognition of the higher risk of transition shock for newly graduated health professionals.

Early learning in the programs includes learning modules to ensure a good understanding of changes to clinical practice arising from COVID-19. These programs also include PPE use, fit testing, stress and fatigue management.

Grad+ program:

Western Health is a rapidly growing health service, and we have robust plans in place to grow our workforce to meet future demand. We are also committed to being an employer of choice and supporting our staff to be their best at all stages of their career. Our new graduates are commencing Year 1 of our new Grad+ program, which is a 2 year program which includes 4 rotations, with the second year including more rotations into specialty areas. The program also includes 2 free Western Health taught post-graduate subjects that are accredited with 5 universities focusing on advanced clinical assessment, pathophysiology and clinical leadership. The program has been specifically designed to offer benefits to our early career nurses and midwives that include:

- Offer an entry to practice program that provides wider experience to different clinical specialties, to create well-rounded nurses and midwives with diverse experience in their early career years.
- Support our nurses and midwives to be able to have broader experiences and options available to them prior to choosing their preferred specialty
- Embed a culture of life-long learning through supporting the continuation of formal education into the early career years
- Make post-graduate education more accessible and affordable for our nurses and midwives

- Increase participation rates in post-graduate education, by offering 2 free subjects as part of their early career years.
- Enhance Western Health's status of an employer of choice for newly graduated nurses and midwives.

Many of our graduates from last year are undertaking Year 2 of the program, including the West Metro graduates. There has been a lot of interest in this program, and nurses that have recently completed their graduate programs from other health services have asked to join Year 2 of the program this year.

Supporting skill acquisition and recognising skill development

RUSON program:

Western Health significantly expanded our RUSON program during 2021, with the roles working very successfully in all of our wards and supporting COVID specific activities – including vaccination, contact tracing, PPE Spotting, COVID testing and Rapid Antigen Testing. The RUSONs that did not graduate have been retained, and Western Health is currently recruiting additional RUSONs to ensure that all of our wards and departments are supported by this role going forward. Many of the RUSONs that were supporting COVID specific activities have been supported to commence in our inpatient wards. This program has been confirmed up until the end of December 2022, and Western Health is investigating funding options to embed it beyond this date.

RUSOM program:

Western Health was the first health service in Victoria to introduce the RUSOM model, and over 2021 this was expanded from being only in post-natal to supporting our midwives within other areas of maternity. The RUSOMs that did not graduate have been retained, and Western Health is currently recruiting additional RUSOMs to ensure that our maternity departments are supported by this role going forward. This program has been confirmed up until the end of December 2022, and Western Health is investigating funding options to embed it beyond this date.

Clinical Assistant role:

Western Health implemented the Clinical Assistant role in 2020 for undergraduate medical students to be able to be employed to support COVID related activities. This program is continuing, but on a smaller scale.

COVID-19 Readiness Training for Allied Health Program:

Western Health are participants in the *COVID-19 Readiness Training for Allied Health Program*. Education staff have been allocated to the discipline of physiotherapy, nutrition, speech pathology and social work to continue to develop interdisciplinary skills until July 2022.

Enabling mid-career transitions

Subsidised post-graduate courses:

Western Health has been in the position of being able to fully subsidise our post-graduate courses in Critical Care and Emergency, which has resulted in a significant increase in participation rates in 2022.

Whilst not fully subsidised, our other post-graduate courses will receive generous support in 2022. This is however time limited due to ongoing financial constraints.

Many staff that were redeployed during COVID peak chose to enrol in Western Health's Discovery programs or post-graduate courses to allow them to continue to work within their redeployed area.

Supporting wellbeing and safety

The wellbeing and safety of our staff is a core priority for Western Health, and this has been a focussed priority since COVID emerged in 2020. Melbourne's West has been particularly hard hit by COVID in 2020 and 2021, and Western Health has been at the forefront with large COVID demand being managed by our teams.

Strategies already in place

Research:

Western Health has partnered with our Western Health-Deakin University Partnership to undertake longitudinal research into the psychosocial wellbeing and impact of COVID-19 on our health workforce, which is currently up to the third progressive study, which has followed Western Health staff through 2020 and 2021.

These studies assessed the psychosocial wellbeing and impact of COVID-19 on health workers, including:

- current health status and the respondents rating on the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21). The DASS is a quantitative measure of distress along the three axes of depression, anxiety, and stress;
- the perceived impact of COVID-19 on respondents and their work, including their exposure to / contact with COVID-19;
- concerns about impact on personal and family health;
- perceived impact of COVID-19 on respondents at work;
- perceived impact of COVID-19 on respondents outside of work;
- the respondents' experiences of the health service's response to COVID-19, including rating the health service's response to COVID-19, including perceived concern and support for health workers' emotional wellbeing;
- the extent to which various measures implemented by the health service (including PPE) is perceived to interfere with respondents' work;
- the experience of staff who have been redeployed as a result of the pandemic.

These studies have been published in peer reviewed journals, and expanded to include additional health services.

Importantly the findings have informed Western Health's approach and response during the COVID period.

Additional Security:

During the COVID peak period the incidence of occupational violence and aggression towards our staff, particularly from people with 'anti-vax' sentiments, noticeably increased.

Western Health has strategies in place which identifies the risk of aggression early using our award winning Behaviour of Concern risk assessment tool, and proactively prevents and manages it via a multi-disciplinary plan. These strategies have been recognised by Western Health being finalists in the WorkSafe Awards in 2020 and 2022.

Despite this, additional support was required so additional Security guards were employed and deployed to high risk departments including our Emergency Departments, Intensive Care Units and COVID wards.

Leave management:

In November 2021 ahead of the festive season, Western Health undertook detailed modelling of:

- Western Health's staffing requirements,
- known staff commencements and movement, and
- the predicted activity (which includes the projected COVID-related activity as modelled by the Burnett Institute).

This complex and detailed piece of work, was undertaken to allow for managers to confidently grant additional leave to our nurses and midwives (where possible) over that period for their wellbeing and to facilitate recovery and relaxation. This modelling struck a balance, and provided leave wherever we possibly could whilst still meeting the healthcare needs of our community.

Western Health has over-recruited for 2022 knowing that our staff have accrued leave balances that they will want to take, and to allow this to occur wherever possible to facilitate the recovery, relaxation and retention of our employees.

Access to reliable, up-to-date information:

Western Health developed an extensive COVID microsite & Wellbeing Micro Site in 2020, which included extensive and up-to-date detailed information and initiatives on all aspects of COVID management, including Wellbeing and Support, including:

- caring for yourself
- caring for others
- accessing personal and professional support
- family violence during COVID
- helpful apps and resources
- wellbeing videos

Wellbeing Wednesdays:

Webinars conducted by professional facilitators on each Wednesday designed to give staff the tools and knowledge to tackle challenges that are thrown up in times of increased pressure. These sessions have been open to all staff and give participants tactics and support to work through a range of common situations with confidence and compassion.

Wellbeing hubs and breakout spaces:

The Wellness & Support Hubs at Western Health hospitals have been open throughout COVID surge periods for staff to come and sit, relax, unwind and switch off.

Psychologists and Western Health Support Staff were available on site.

Breakout spaces were installed for staff in a number of locations across Footscray Hospital and Sunshine Hospital to better enable physical distancing during break times, including additional marquees and outdoor environments.

Recognition of staff doing extra shifts and overtime:

Western Health recognised our staff that worked incredibly hard helping out their teams by working double shifts and doing overtime. As a token of our thanks and recognition of these people going above and beyond, during the crisis each month our People & Culture ran a report identifying staff that have worked overtime/double shifts and selected staff were sent a prepaid gift card to spend on whatever they would like.

Flexibility to battle staff fatigue:

Western Health's Executive authorised managers to use their discretion to implement reasonable measures to support staff wellbeing and battle fatigue over January and February 2022.

Managers were asked to ensure that any measures implemented need to be equitable, and ensure that patient care, continuity of care and handover are not compromised.

Some of the measures implemented including staff leaving early despite being paid for the entire shift.

Managing staff fatigue:

Western Health understands that preventing and managing staff fatigue is one of the key risks that we all need to have at the forefront of our minds, not only during COVID peak but during COVID recovery.

Regular webinar sessions have been running since January 2022 on practical measures that managers and staff can be put in place to ensure that they are managing your own fatigue, and helping teams and colleagues.

These sessions continue to be offered and are well subscribed.

Psychologist on-site and tailored support packages:

A suite of interventions continues to be offered to help support our staff, including:

- On-site psychologists who have supported staff in our Intensive Care Units (ICU), Emergency Departments (ED) and Women's and Children's in regular group or individual sessions.
- Stress stocktakes and tailored sessions for managers to understand symptoms of burnout, recognise stress in others and advocate for their teams.
- Customised support for teams

Debrief support:

Western Health offered regular confidential debriefing session hosted by our Employee Assistance Program psychologists to our clinical teams and managers, knowing how important it is for our staff to have the opportunity to discuss and process their experiences in a safe forum.

These have been well subscribed, and staff were educated on the beneficial practice that ultimately supports healthy coping skills, promotes psychological safety and emotional wellbeing.

Nurse & Midwifery Health Program:

Western Health liaised closely with the Victorian Nurse and Midwifery Health Program to offer profession specific sessions with their expert facilitators. These are programs were specifically tailored to nurses and midwives by people who understand the pressures faced by those professions.

Unsolicited feedback from the CEO of the Nurse and Midwifery Health Program from his observations of Western Health nurses and midwives: "I have - during every one of the groups I have facilitated at Western Health - found everyone to be incredibly focused, patient and positive, in spite of the obvious challenges they continue to confront.... I have also been struck – during every forum – by the quality of person you have managing the respective departments. They have each been a joy to liaise with and importantly they care for their workforce AND their workforce appears to care for them. This is truly remarkable as it's not something I always see during my incursions to health services."

Café vouchers:

Cafe vouchers were issued to staff that are working overtime or doing double shifts. Additionally Western Health procured frozen meals from The Good Company to enable staff that are working overtime and double to access healthy meals outside café hours.

Additionally night shifters are free to collect a coffee and muffin on their way home from each site, meal vouchers have been provided to all units, lunches have been provided daily to the community nursing teams.

All staff, families and volunteers were also offered access to a 20% discount for procured frozen meals from The Good Company to alleviate the stress of preparing meals at the present time.

Snack boxes:

Snack boxes are being delivered to our wards and departments with the aim of keeping staff nourished.

Manager Support sessions:

Western Health continues to offer our Manager Support series, with dedicated sessions that aim at exploring the current managerial challenges and give our busy managers the theory and tools to be able to feel confident in leading their teams during these really challenging times.

Continuing the Nurse and Midwifery Managers sessions with the Manager Assist program provided by our Employee Assistance Program to ensure confidential discussions and support strategies are developed for either self or teams support strategies. .

Morale Boosters:

Morale booster's continue across every site that includes pop up events such as Mr Whippy Ice-creams, donuts, chocolates, seeds to plant, kindness week cookies, free coffees. Keeping up the humour with regular comedy sessions, and many more planned pop ups.

Future Plans:

Plans include the continuation and evaluation of current activities and translational research to better enable us to identify most impactful strategies.

Other plans include a roll out of psychological safety training, a revamp of all leadership and management development programs to include wellbeing modules that focus on elements of psychosocial safety, including work design and good mental health at work, specific development programs targeting advocating for self and teams,