



**Consultation on the range of health practitioners who
should be enabled to sign Work Capacity Medical
Certificates: Jobseeker Support for Work and Income New
Zealand**

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Submission to:

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1. Summary

This submission was completed on behalf of professional organisation, the College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) Inc. by:

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2. Background

The College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) Inc. welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on a proposal to broaden the range of health practitioners who can sign Work Capacity Medical Certificates (“WCMC”). This proposal is considerably important as it provides a significant opportunity to improve access to treatment, advice and support for patients who may be vulnerable should the range of health practitioners be extended to include registered nurses.

The College of Nurses is a professional body of New Zealand registered nurses and nurse practitioners from all regions and specialties both within and outside of the District Health Board (“DHB”) setting. It provides a voice for the nursing profession and professional commentary on issues that affect nurses, and also the health of the whole community, aiming for excellence in nursing practice and health care delivery which addresses disparities in health.

Our organisations have more specific detailed comments and feedback which is outlined in detail in this submission.

3. Submission

Overall, the College supports the proposal to enable a wider range of health practitioners, in particular registered nurses, to sign Work Capacity Medical Certificates – Jobseeker Support.

3.1 Rationale

The College considers that registered nurses should be enabled to sign WCMC. At present, registered nurses are educated to use their nursing knowledge and judgement to:

- Assess health needs
- Provide care
- Advise and support people to manage their health.

“Registered nurses practise independently and in collaboration with other health professionals, perform general nursing functions, and delegate to and direct enrolled nurses, healthcare assistants and others. They provide comprehensive assessments to develop, implement, and evaluate an integrated plan of health care, and provide interventions that require substantial scientific and professional knowledge, skills and clinical decision making. They do this in a range of settings in partnership with individuals, families, whanau and communities. Registered nurses may practise in a variety of clinical contexts depending on their educational preparation and practice experience. Registered nurses are accountable for ensuring that all the health services they provide are consistent with their education and assessed competence, meet legislative requirements and are supported by appropriate standards” (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2014).

Registered nurses are, therefore, autonomous practitioners educated and competent to issue WCMC.

Feedback from our members has indicated that in some primary health care services, patients accessing services represent a low socio economic demographic which includes people who are homeless, living in shelters, have very limited finances and suffer from depression, anxiety and have complex needs in many cases.

Such patients would therefore meet the criteria for WINZ Jobseekers Support as well as the criteria for WINZ Supportive Living Payment. In such situations, a broader range of health practitioners able to sign WCMC improves their access which is important for a population demographic who, without the WCMC are without money and shelter until they have a signed and approved certificate in place.

3.2 Who should be able to sign

Nurse practitioners are already able to sign WCMC, however, the College considers that this should be extended to include registered nurses working in primary health care settings (primary health care nurses, or practice nurses for example). Registered nurses are skilled and experienced in the relevant level of assessment and diagnosis and are therefore capable of determining capacity for working in relation to a range of potential health related issues (infections diseases, accidents such as strains and sprains, mental health related issues, etc).

The person completing the certificate should have enough clinical knowledge of the patient in order to make an informed clinical judgement about the work capacity of the person based on their professional knowledge. This should then be documented on either the certificate or the patient’s clinical notes to ensure that if an audit were to occur, adequate information is available.

Sufficient ‘checks and balances’ in the process would need to be in place to ensure that practitioners completing certificates are aware if the patient has had a recently issued certificate and what the recommendation in that assessment was in order to prevent patients from ‘shopping around’.

3.3 Why should this function be extended to include registered nurses

The College considers that extending this function to registered nurses is well aligned with Government priorities to ensure:

- More effective and timely treatment for patients
- Improve patient access to services and treatment
- Improved flexibility of services and treatment
- Enables the registered nurse to practise to their full potential as they are educated to do

It would also reduce the cost to the patient of accessing a general practitioner.

3.4 What are the training and education considerations

This should easily accessible to any practitioner providing this service.

We suggest that a mutidisciplinary streamlined, online course could address the training requirements and the expectations of WINZ.

Monitoring could be subject to the possibility of an audit similar to other situations?

3.5 Additional comments

Our members have indicated that consideration should be given to extending the range of health practitioners who can sign off Supported Living Payments Certificates and repeat certiicates. This is particularly important in regard to:

- Mental health and addictions patients who often meet the criteria for a supported living payment. Mental health nurse practitioners are educated and experienced to sign off supported living certificates for patients who have a mental health classification.
- Patients who are asked by WINZ to undergo a second assessment for a supported living payment certificate should be assessed by a psychiatrist and not by another general practitioner.
- Given the fact that nurse practitioners can already sign WCMC, and the proposal to extend this function to other health practitioners, consideration be given to revise the title to Work Capacity Certificate.
- This service should be reimbursed at the same rate no matter which health professional is providing the service.

4. Summary

Should the proposal be implemented to enable additional health practitioners to sign off on WCMC, this will enable a more streamlined approach and an improved collaborative pathway between primary health care settings and WINZ; and will ultimately result in improved access for patients.

References

Nursing Council of New Zealand. 2014. *Scopes of practice: registered nurse*. Available at: www.nursingcouncil.org.nz (accessed 12 February 2015).