ELECTION WRAP – THE KEY ISSUES FOR NURSES AND MIDWIVES
Health is a hot issue for many Australians as we head to the polls, but as nurses and midwives we have an additional interest in where the political parties stand on health and our rights at work.

Inevitably it’s decisions made by our policy makers that affect our jobs every day.

This is why the QNU is seeking commitments from all political parties to strengthen and protect, not only our work, but also the very health system that makes our country great.

**It’s a matter of priorities**

Every Australian deserves to receive high quality care when in hospital or an aged care facility.

But the ability of health care professionals—including nurses and midwives—to deliver this high quality care is largely determined by decisions made by governments of the day.

Over the past few years there’s been a lot of political talk about a ‘budget crisis’ and the need to wind back spending.

Unfortunately, health has been a victim of this so-called ‘crisis’, suffering devastating cuts made by politicians who claim to understand the importance of a strong health care system.

True, federal budgets have many competing priorities, but health funding goes to the very heart of what we want our country’s future to look like.

Do we want to protect the world-class Medicare system we’ve worked so hard to build?

Do we want to empower health care professionals to be able to work to their full scope of practice and deliver world-leading quality care?

Do we want a fair work environment that values those who work unsociable hours?

And do we want a government that looks beyond the budget bottom line and instead invests in the future of our health care system?

The answer, of course, is yes.

A robust and well-funded health care system is an essential cornerstone of modern-day Australia.

The state of our health care system determines the health of our citizens, and should therefore be a key priority for any government serious about improving the quality of life for its citizens.

**What commitments are we seeking this election?**

- **Safe staffing and skill mix in aged care**
  This includes a requirement for a Registered Nurse to be employed in residential aged care facilities 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- **Defending and improving universal health care**
  Ensuring access to health care is based on need and not capacity to pay by restricting the growth of Medicare co-payments (out of pocket expenses) and advancing nursing and midwifery roles which plug gaps in health care delivery (such as Nurse Navigators).

- **Maintaining penalty rates, existing entitlements and rights at work**
  Maintaining penalty rates for all Australians, protecting and improving existing entitlements (such as paid parental leave), and guaranteeing the rights and conditions of all workers through a fair industrial relations framework.

- **Restoring federal health funding**
  Restore the $57 billion cut from federal health care funding to ensure the states and territories can meet demand for public health services.

- **Strengthening accountability for public funding**
  Strengthening accountability and transparency for public funding provided to all health and aged care services through improved public reporting, including nursing and midwifery staffing numbers, skill mix and quality outcomes.
Actions speak louder than words

All political parties claim health is an important issue for the future of Australia. However, over the past few years we have not seen much evidence of a government with a plan to strengthen our health system.

With $57 billion cut from health spending in the Abbott government’s first budget and only $2.9 billion re-installed in this year’s budget, frontline health services are inevitably going to feel the pinch.

An ageing population and increasing health expenditure certainly present challenges for our health system and for budget-makers, but QNU Secretary Beth Mohle said cutting services now will only cost more later on.

“We need to develop smarter, more sustainable health budgets into the future by changing the way we think and what we prioritise,” she said.

“We need to focus on preventative health initiatives that keep people out of hospital.

“Most importantly, we need to move away from this idea that cutting frontline services in order to save money is somehow a long-term solution.”

Invest now, save later

One way to build a stronger and more sustainable health care system is to reform how the system currently operates.

This means investing in nurses and midwives through better skill mix and numbers and bringing the focus back to the patient or resident.

This can be achieved, for example, by considering new midwifery models of care that empower midwives and lead to better outcomes for expectant mothers.

It can also be achieved by creating new nursing positions in the aged care, primary health care, and community sectors, similar to the Nurse Navigator positions the Queensland government is currently rolling out.

Such positions would focus on improving the co-ordination of patient care across health care settings and sectors.

Universal health care

Australia’s health care system has long been underpinned by the simple principle that access to quality health care must be based on need, not capacity to pay.

And while we are indeed more fortunate than other countries, such as the US where the health system operates on the ‘user-pays’ principle, we cannot take this for granted.

If we did move to a user-pays system in which one’s ability to receive quality care is determined by their income, then we could expect drastic cuts to publically funded frontline services—and worryingly, that’s exactly what we have witnessed over the past few years.

The billions of dollars ripped from the health budget gives a clear indication of the current government’s agenda, and signals what’s to come if they are re-elected.

Respecting our work

We also want a system that respects the work we do.

Workers fought for penalty rates so those of us who work weekends or through the night are adequately compensated.

The Productivity Commission has recommended bringing Sunday penalty rates in line with Saturday wages for those working in the retail and hospitality sectors and Malcolm Turnbull has already said lower penalty rates are inevitable in a seven day economy.

In October last year, Mr Turnbull described Sunday penalty rates as a hallmark of the old economy.

“The only reason they’re different, I assume, is history,” said Mr Turnbull, demonstrating his government’s lack of understanding on the very purpose of penalty rates.

The QNU has been campaigning collectively with other unions since 2014 to ensure our penalty rates are protected.

A two-tiered system—which says one group of workers deserves to be compensated for working unsociable hours while another group does not—has no place in Australia.

Scrapping penalty rates for some workers would also signal the beginning of a slippery slope, where nurses and midwives could be next.

Use your vote wisely

Nurses and midwives are a powerful force, not least of all because we are one of the largest frontline workforces in this country.

This election, we have the power to send a clear message to our politicians that we value our world-class health system.

Our vote can make a difference.