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Essential, but not exceptional? The visibility gap for nursing in the Australian honours system

The Australian honours system has, for over 50 years, recognised individuals who have made exceptional contributions to our nation. With close to 300 000 recipients since its inception, approximately 0.5 per cent of Australians have received this distinction.

In contrast, recognition within nursing, the largest healthcare workforce in the country, is strikingly low. Estimates suggest that only around 0.05 per cent of nurses have been honoured through the Order of Australia, around one-tenth the rate of recognition seen in the general population.

This disparity is not only significant, but also difficult to justify. At first glance, this appears to be a question of under-representation. On closer examination, it is also a question of visibility.

A challenge in assessing nursing's presence within the honours system is that recipients are not consistently identified by profession. Many individuals with nursing backgrounds are recognised under broader categories such as community health, women's health, public service, or advocacy. While this reflects the breadth and impact of nursing, it also obscures the profession itself.

In effect, some nurses are present in the honours system, yet not readily identifiable as nurses.

This distinction matters. Recognition that does not explicitly name nursing limits the profession's visibility in the public domain and, importantly, within the policy landscape. When nursing contributions are absorbed into broader categories, the collective impact of the profession becomes harder to quantify, articulate and advocate for.

I was recently honoured with an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) for service to nursing. While deeply grateful, I was also surprised.

Like many nurses, I have spent my career working within collaborative, team-based environments alongside highly skilled and dedicated clinicians. Being singled out for recognition felt both humbling and, at times, uncomfortable. This reaction is not uncommon within our profession. Nurses are often reluctant to elevate their own contributions, despite the significant impact of their work.

This speaks to a broader issue within nursing – not only are we under-represented in formal recognition systems, but we also contribute to this under-representation. We undervalue our own work, hesitate to promote our achievements and are less likely to nominate our colleagues.

Since 2010, only a relatively small number of individuals have been explicitly recognised for service to nursing through the Order of Australia, as previously mentioned, around one-tenth the rate of recognition seen in the general population. While this figure may underestimate total representation, given that some nurses are recognised under broader categories, it nonetheless highlights a profession that is not proportionately visible within national recognition systems.

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The majority of those recognised have received the OAM, a significant honour recognising outstanding service to the community and profession.

While nurses are recognised at approximately one-tenth the rate of the general population, medical practitioners appear to be recognised at disproportionately higher rates, pointing to a clear imbalance in how healthcare contributions are acknowledged.

This is despite a strong history of nursing leadership, with individuals recognised for contributions to areas such as mental health, cardiovascular care and nursing education, demonstrating the depth and breadth of impact within the profession.

Recognition shapes perception. It influences how professions are viewed by the public, by policymakers and within healthcare systems. When nursing is not clearly and consistently recognised, it reinforces outdated hierarchies and diminishes the profession's influence in shaping healthcare policy and reform.

Nurses are frequently described as essential, a term that was widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic. While accurate, this language can unintentionally normalise extraordinary contributions as expected rather than exceptional.

The innovation, leadership, advocacy and clinical excellence demonstrated across the profession warrant recognition at the highest levels. When this recognition is absent, or not clearly attributed to nursing, it limits the profession's ability to fully realise its influence.

The Australian honours system is, by design, nomination-driven. Individuals are put forward through an online application process by colleagues, peers and community members, with

citations reviewed through an arduous, structured national process. This means that recognition is not simply a reflection of contribution – it is also a reflection of who is nominated, how their work is described and how effectively their impact is articulated.

If we are to change this under-representation and lack of visibility, action is required at multiple levels. As individuals, we must be willing to articulate the value of our work. As colleagues and leaders, we must actively identify and nominate those whose contributions deserve recognition. And as a profession, we must be intentional in how we frame nominations, ensuring that nursing is explicitly identified, clearly articulated and visible within citations.

Recognition is not simply about honouring individuals. It is about shaping the narrative of a profession.

By increasing both the number and visibility of nurses within the Australian honours system, we strengthen the voice of nursing in national conversations about healthcare, policy and reform.

The challenge is not only to ensure that nurses are recognised, but that, when they are, they are unmistakably recognised as nurses.

Nursing is already exceptional – the task now is to ensure it is recognised as such.

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ACORN members who have received Australian Honours

Elsie June Allen AM
Member of the Order of Australia
awarded 12 June 1995.

In recognition of service to the health care and to the advancement of nursing standards.

Mary Barry OAM
Medal of the Order of Australia
awarded 10 June 1991.

In recognition of service to the nursing profession.

Judith Cornell AM
Member of the Order of Australia
awarded 12 June 1995.

In recognition of service to nursing, particularly to the quality of nursing practice and education.

Phyllis Davis AM
Member of the Order of Australia
awarded 11 June 2018.

For significant service to nursing through clinical, administrative and international advisory roles, and to nurse education.

Toni Hains OAM
Medal of the Order of Australia
awarded 9 June 2025.

For service to nursing.

Liz Mazzei AM
Member of the Order of Australia
awarded 26 January 2014.

For significant service to nursing through a range of professional and voluntary organisations, and to the community.

Sr Mary Felix Thorburn
Member of the Order of Australia
awarded 26 January 1995.

For service to nursing particularly in the field of intensive care and operating theatre nursing.