

Full statement from Annie Butler, Federal Secretary of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, provided to Croakey Health Media on 20 June, 2024

“Transition to nuclear power is an unnecessary and risky gamble as Australia is already making promising progress towards a strong and much less risky renewable energy sector.

While Australia is home to 33 percent of the world’s uranium deposits, around one third of Australia’s electricity is already supported by renewable energy sources. In 2022, 32% of Australia’s total electricity generation was from renewable sources.

While solar energy generation contributes relatively little at this stage, recent rapid expansion is well-placed to harness the fact that Australia is the continent with the highest average solar radiation per square metre.

The notion of Australia becoming reliant on nuclear energy is a dangerous distraction from our considerable progress towards a much more climate and health-conscious renewable energy future.

The Government is yet to legislate or fund the Health and Climate Strategy which includes a “health in all policies” approach. Investing in ongoing reliance on mining uranium and the generation of nuclear power will not address the health issues related to coal and gas, which ANMF members confront and deal with on a daily basis. It will only increase these issues and exacerbate risks to the environment and population health, making the work of our members even harder.

While accidents related to nuclear power generation are rare, nuclear reactors pose a massive health risk with both immediate and extremely long-term impacts. The potential risks associated with the storage of nuclear waste are considerable and very challenging to resolve, especially since Australia is already grappling with how to manage and store the existing volume of nuclear waste already produced from other sources. The prospect of seven proposed nuclear power plants around Australia is neither warranted nor economically sensible – with evidence from CSIRO demonstrating that nuclear energy is likely to be more expensive than other less risky options and that solar and wind-powered energy is likely to be the cheapest path.

One of the primary health risks associated with nuclear power accidents beyond immediate and acute exposure to radiation is when nuclear material enters waterways and food sources. This can also occur due to accidents related to stored nuclear waste. Well known disasters including those at Chernobyl and Fukushima provide ample evidence for both the immediate and very long-term consequences of nuclear powerplant accidents. Evidence shows that even at lower doses, ionizing radiation can cause health effects such as cardiovascular disease and cataracts as well as cancer.

ANMF members work continuously to improve the health of all communities. Our assessment of the proposal to transition to nuclear power is that it will do little to achieve that goal.”

