

Enhancing skills in mental health emergency care

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Emergency departments (EDs) are often the first point of contact for people with acute mental health problems. ED staff have increasingly become the 'gatekeepers' to the mental health system but are often, however, under-prepared to respond to mental health emergencies. Furthermore, the profound rural–urban differences in access, infrastructure and cultural issues, and the need to recruit and support a broader mental health workforce in rural areas, exacerbates the challenges for clinicians in responding effectively to mental health emergencies.

NSW Health first funded a small trial of a customised Mental Health Emergency Care (MHEC) course in 2007, which was developed and delivered online by the University of Newcastle (UoN) Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH). The program, which targeted rural ED and mental health service clinicians and support staff, achieved statistically significant improvements ($p < .05$) in key learning and skill domains, and high levels of satisfaction with the course and learning outcomes.

NSW Health subsequently funded the development and state-wide roll-out of an enhanced program by a unique partnership between the CRRMH and the NSW Institute of Psychiatry (IoP) during 2008–2010. The vocational component of the MHEC learning and development program comprised a three-day, face-to-face, workshop-style course. The academic component of the program comprises a postgraduate elective in UoN and IoP Masters programs.

In eight face-to-face courses delivered to date, 140 MHS and ED clinicians have completed the course. Statistically significant improvements ($p < .05$) were detected in all learning and skill domains. The academic program is currently under evaluation, with almost 60 students having satisfactorily completed the postgraduate elective in 2010. The MHEC program is offering viable and effective opportunities for clinical knowledge and skill enhancement in mental health emergency care.