

A multidisciplinary computer literacy program for rural and remote clinicians

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Jackie Poyser has a Bachelor of Communications Degree and is an experienced communications and publications staff member of RCNA. Jackie has been integral in the development of specialised areas of nursing professional foci, through the creation of RCNA faculties. This includes the development, implementation and maintenance of the online computer literacy course. Through her management of RCNA national activities Jackie has an advanced knowledge of the Australian nursing health landscape.

The 'Learning How to Drive the Internet: Increasing the Level of Computer Literacy in the Rural Nursing and Midwifery Workforce' project was conceived by Australian Rural Nurses and Midwives (ARNM), in partnership with Monash University. The online computer literacy course was designed to support rural and remote participants through seven interactive modules.

In 2008, ARNM's application for a Rural Health Support, Education and Training (RHSET) grant, was successful. Prior to the commencement of the project the ARNM Secretariat closed and the project was transferred to the newly formed Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty of Royal College of Nursing, Australia (RCNA).

Geographical isolation, workforce shortages and economic restraints all play a part in the increased reliance on electronic communication, with competence in the use of information technology becoming a necessary skill for all health service employees, particularly those who work in isolated areas of Australia.

Online learning has therefore become an increasingly attractive model for rural and remote nurses and midwives, as many are unable to access central teaching hubs, with workforce shortages compounding the difficulties of releasing staff to attend 'off-site' continuing professional development (CPD) activities.

Minimal advertising of RCNA's program resulted in an overwhelming response, with over 800 clinicians expressing an interest. Of these, 150 participants were selected, with the age range reflecting the demographics of the nursing and midwifery workforce, as the majority of participants were over forty years of age.

As a result of the huge interest in the online learning program, ongoing inquiries and positive participant feedback, the Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty recognised the need to offer and expand the program following the funding period. It had become evident that people from other disciplines, ie Aboriginal health care workers, allied health professionals and primary care assistants would benefit from the online training program.

RCNA was able to accommodate the needs of the broader cohort, ensuring the training package was offered to other health care professionals in rural and remote locations. A nominal fee-for-service program was launched in May 2009, which now forms part of the suite of CPD activities offered by RCNA. Currently, there are over 900 participants registered in the online computer literacy training program.

Relevant statistical information has been, and will continue to be, collected and collated for publication in refereed journals and other RCNA publications. The analysed data will also be made available to Federal and state governments to identify the CPD needs of health care professionals in rural and remote locations.