

Linking service reform with infrastructure upgrades in rural health services

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Rob Pulsford has worked in the health industry for 24 years, originally completing hospital-based registered nurse training at the Royal Brisbane Hospital in 1989. Since then he has completed both midwifery and psychiatric nursing qualifications and a Bachelor of Nursing, further postgraduate studies have been completed in project management, health economics, further education and training and a Master of Business Administration. Rob has worked extensively in rural, remote and regional settings across Australia and is currently Area Director Planning and Infrastructure for WA Country Health Service (WACHS). Particular areas of interest include the development of sustainable models of health care service delivery into rural and remote areas of Australia with an emphasis on the challenges presented in recruiting suitably qualified health practitioners.

WA Country Health Service (WACHS) delivers health services across all of rural WA, an area of 2.55 million square kilometres with a total population of over 470,000 people. Health services are delivered from a variety of settings ranging from 70 hospitals to remote area nursing posts and community health centres.

The WA Department of Health (DoH) has a capital program that has committed \$855 million to the upgrade of rural health infrastructure over the next 5 years. This major government investment, in enhancing public health infrastructure across rural WA, is being linked to significant reform regarding how health services are delivered in the rural setting.

To support this approach WACHS, in line with the WA Government's Works Reform initiative, is taking a robust approach to service planning prior to considering implementing infrastructure solutions. This process involves developing comprehensive clinical service plans that explore and identify potential models of care, service types and service profiles needed to deliver the type and scope of services required in the future.

Once the service plan has organisational sign-off concept master planning and business case development is commenced.

With the first services plan, produced under this new innovative approach to the capital planning process, recently signed-off the challenge for WACHS is to ensure that services reform is achieved in line with the delivery of new infrastructure. It is critical that the situation does not occur where historical service delivery approaches, including related workplace culture, are transplanted into the new or redeveloped facilities.

The evolving strategy to achieve this is focused on the early development of an action plan to drive the development of service reform thinking and initiatives as part of the initial concept design development process. This in turn will form a key component of the building design and construction process as well as being a component of the transition planning phase of the project.

This process will ensure that the service delivery reform will be a key part of any new or redeveloped facilities, which will assist to ensure that genuine value for money solutions are developed, which in turn will complement the delivery quality and sustainable health services to rural communities into the future.

Key elements to ensuring that the desired outcomes are achieved include having early and strong engagement and consultation with local stakeholders (both clinical and community), a commitment to communication, a focus on national and even international best-practice solutions and models of care and, finally, a continuing focus on safety and quality.