

Measuring and improving health workforce retention in rural and remote Australia

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Background

The need to sustain an adequate, appropriately qualified health workforce is a key factor in providing accessible, comprehensive, and sustainable high quality primary health care services in small rural and remote communities. Currently many of these health services experience shortages of health workers and high levels of staff turnover. However, little is known about what is a reasonable length of stay of health workers or the effectiveness of retention measures and incentives in improving it.

Methods

Relevant literature was reviewed, existing workforce databases were analysed and a survey of rural and remote PHC services was implemented

Results

There is a dearth of relevant national workforce retention data for all disciplines other than medicine. Utilising primary and secondary data we defined the real costs of recruitment and, based on empirical data, calculated benchmark retention figures for different disciplines in both rural and remote health services

Discussion

There were important policy implications of the study. Optimising workforce retention through specific single incentives will fail without the broader essential requirements for a sustainable health service, including a comprehensive workforce strategy. Consolidation of the current piecemeal approaches to incentives into a block grant scheme to allow services to be totally flexible in devising appropriate employment packages would be more effective.

Appropriately targeted incentives can result in improved retention and benefit patient care at no additional cost for many small rural and remote primary health care services.

An appropriate local and national data collection and analysis system will require: agreed indicators and benchmarks; enhanced human resource and information technology capacity; engagement with Rural Workforce Agencies or researchers to assist with analysis where necessary.