Capacity Building in Rural Mental Health in Western Australia

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This paper describes a regional success story in capacity building in terms of workforce development in rural WA. A rural and remote distance education program in mental health was delivered in 1999 to health professionals (general nurses, allied health and Aboriginal health workers) who are in contact with mentally ill patients at the primary level in country areas. The objectives were: to assist participants to develop a better understanding of the social context of mental illness in the community; to equip them with skills for helping people who are experiencing mental illness in a variety of settings (not just in the hospital); to assist them to further develop a range of skills in mental health assessment and intervention; and to enhance the general practice of rural and remote health practitioners without committing them to studying formally for a mental health qualification.

The program was undertaken by 31 health professionals (26 nurses, four allied health and one Aboriginal health worker) distributed across ten sites in WA, from Broome in the north to Albany in the south. Six tutors were allocated for student support. The program had a practical clinical component, residential school and clinical placements in mental health settings, and formal modules of learning and assignments.

Evaluation on completion of the program was extremely positive: the program filled a gap in the paucity of such practical learning programs in mental health. The participants gained knowledge of mental health management regimes and mental health assessment skills and developed networks that will enable them to improve the quality of care they provide to country residents at the primary level. Over 80% of participants indicated that they had acquired good to very good understanding of behaviours associated with mental illness: prior to the program, more than a third had a poor to very poor understanding of such behaviours, with only 4% having a good understanding. The proportion of respondents able to assist clients confidently has increased from 7% to 78%. There was a unanimous agreement that the learning undertaken could be transferred to real clinical practice. This has been ascertained by participants and their line managers in a further evaluation conducted four months after completion of the program. Over 60% of participants and over 70% of line managers responding said there had been a large to very large impact on improving the participants’ relationship with the mental health team. Almost half reported that there had been a large to very large impact on liaising with mental health providers and on sharing information about mental health issues with colleagues. In general, only about 17% of participants and 8% of line managers thought that the program had little impact on their clinical practice.

This project has been a collaboration between the WA Centre for Rural Health and Community Development, Rural Health Development and the South West Mental Health Service. Other than workforce development, it has been a successful attempt at
capacity building in terms of innovative resourcing in order to address a State-wide need in mental health education for those at the forefront of rural practice.

AUTHORS

Dr Samar Aoun is the Director of the WA Centre for Rural Health and Community Development, which is an incorporated non-profit organisation, with a community focus, providing research, education and training services to rural Western Australia. Through her research in mental health (suicide prevention), public health (diabetes and cardiovascular disease prevention) and general practice issues, Dr Aoun has endeavoured to improve the quality of and access to rural health and community services. With a Doctorate in Medical Demography from London University and a Masters in Public Health, Dr Aoun engages in collaborative projects with the academic institutions, industries and community organisations to enhance the well-being of rural people.

For this conference, Samar will be presenting the findings of two successful projects with implications for all rural Australia: The implementation of a rural and remote distance education program in mental health for health professionals including Aboriginal health workers (RHSET funded) and the promotion of rural men’s health through an industry-based diabetes education and screening program (RIRDC funded).

Melissa Vernon has worked in the rural health sector for 20 years, mainly in 5 to 6-year cycles in the areas of

♦ tertiary education in nursing, rural and public health
♦ rural community and public health management
♦ State-wide rural health development and policy

Melissa was seconded onto the HealthDirect project in 1999 to implement the service in rural WA and is now responsible for the implementation of telehealth in rural WA.

She is a keen sailor, isolated beach and wilderness recluse and mother of a fun to be with 5 year old.

She is particularly interested in the areas of

♦ rural health service development to incorporate both Primary Health Care approaches and services that more flexibly meet the needs of rural communities, in summary the health promoting health service; and
♦ increasing rural people’s capacity to access the services that they need and to be an informed and active participant in their health care.