

Equalising access to speech pathology services for country children: a telehealth approach

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Being able to communicate clearly is a critical life skill because effective communication underpins successful relationships, educational and work success and psychological health. There are a significant number (12-15%) of children with speech, language and communication difficulties in the school population in Australia. This is a significant issue because research shows that having speech problems early in development correlates with negative long term outcomes including; higher rates of school failure, lower employment rates, greater likelihood of being involved with the criminal justice system, and higher incidence of mental health issues and social issues such as antisocial behaviour.¹

While some language problems resolve with time, many children face difficulties which become pervasive. Early identification and intervention are crucial to limit the disadvantages experienced by children. However, access to speech pathology services is particularly problematic in rural and remote areas of Australia. The shortage of services is due to workforce distribution—only 3.9% of speech pathologists provide services in regional, remote or very remote areas whereas 13.4% of the population live in these areas. Providing services via telehealth has been proposed as a solution to this issue. Royal Far West has developed and evaluated a telehealth speech pathology program to address the needs of children in rural and remote NSW.

The aims of the telehealth intervention were to:

- provide regular services to children from rural and remote NSW
- measure improvement in children identified with speech and language issues (operationalised by increases in goal attainment scale scores)
- identify appropriate cases where telehealth maximises clinical improvement.

81 children from 11 schools and preschools in rural and remote NSW were remotely assessed and identified as needing intervention, and were enrolled into the Come N See program. They received 6 weekly telehealth speech pathology sessions. Children's progress on individualised goal attainment scale measures were assessed at conclusion of the program. Overall, children made statistically significant improvements, with 79% of children meeting or exceeding their treatment goals. The results of the evaluation will be discussed in detail. The presentation will also discuss the strengths and challenges of adapting speech pathology services to telehealth delivery. Specific areas to be addressed include the appropriate identification of participants, engagement of schools and parents in therapy and the role of capacity building, and the findings in relation to the economic benefits of the program.

¹ Law et al., 2009