

Growing rural general practice through business support

Laura Harnett, Kelli Porter

Rural Health West, WA

Aim

Rural Health West, as a not-for-profit organisation, is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and the Western Australian Department of Health through the WA Country Health Service to ensure the needs of rural Western Australians are met by a highly-skilled sustainable health workforce.

The aim of the Rural Health West Practice and Business Support Service is to assist rural general practices with the ongoing needs of managing a viable business that provides quality and sustainable health care to the local population. This aids in improving retention rates of the health workforce and increasing the attractiveness of practices to staff to support succession and expansion planning, as well as enhancing the profitability of the practice.

Target audience

The Rural Health West jurisdiction for overall support includes:

- All Western Australian general practices and primary health care services located in Australian Standard Geographical Classification - Remoteness Area (ASGC-RA) 2 to 5 areas;
- WA Country Health Service public hospital medical practitioners, many of which are now providing outpatient general practice services due to a lack of private general practitioners. Eligible facilities are able to bill eligible patients through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) with approval from the Australian Government Department of Health under Section 19(2) of the *Health Insurance Act 1973*;
- All Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHO), also referred to as Aboriginal Medical Services (AMS), regardless of ASGC-RA location; and
- Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) metropolitan and rural base clinics.

A break up of these practice types is provided in the below tables.

Table 1 Number and type of supported Western Australian practices

Type of general practice	Number
Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (ACCHO)	22
Community health services	18
Group practice	128
Hospital	43
Other	13
Satellite practice	80
Solo general practice	58
Solo general practice (co-located)	3
Total	365

Rural Health West data at 10 February 2015

Table 2 ASGC-RA breakdown of type of supported Western Australian practices

Type of general practice	RA1	RA2	RA3	RA4	RA5
ACCHO	1 (AMS)	2	3	6	10
Community Health Service		5	6	3	4
Group	2 (RFDS)	59	46	16	5
Hospital		6	18	10	9
Other		5	1	3	4
Satellite practice	3 (AMS)	6	12	25	34
Solo general practice		12	20	18	8
Solo general practice (co-located)		1	1	1	

Rural Health West data at 10 February 2015

Background

Studies have identified that the viability of rural and remote general practice rests not only upon such factors as workforce and workload issues, time off and professional support, but also financial factors such as sufficient income to support existing doctors, rising practice costs¹ and issues to do with the business and human resource management of small rural practices.

Anecdotally, most medical practitioners are not trained in business operations and staff management. In rural areas we also know that trained workforce can be limited, such as in the areas of practice management and medical reception. In addition, at 30 November 2013, 52.6 per cent of the rural and remote medical workforce in Western Australia had obtained their basic medical qualification overseas² which can result in limited knowledge and understanding of the complexities of owning or running a business in Australia and the 'red tape' in Australian medical practice.³

The 2009 Business Support Unit pilot program (supported by the Australian Government Department of Health and Rural Health Workforce Australia) found that there was a clear demand for business support from rural and remote general practices in Australia as was evidenced in the diverse range of support requested and provided by the participating Rural Workforce Agencies (RWAs) in Tasmania and Western Australia. This included the development of new resources, the identification and adaptation of existing resources, performance of 'clearing house' activities and brokerage of external services. The Business Support pilot program established that RWAs were best placed to provide ongoing business support, resources and services to rural and remote general practices across Australia given that practices were primarily approaching their RWA when identifying issues surrounding workforce and seeking additional general practitioners or business support services as a consequence of failed recruitment or retention activities.⁴

The Practice and Business Support Service

The Rural Health West Practice and Business Support Service was established in 2011 to assist rural general practices develop and enhance quality and viable general practice services through the provision of business and human resource management support. Initially consisting of a .5 full time equivalent (FTE) program coordinator, the Practice and Business Support Service' first project was to develop the Practice Management Business Support Tool (the Tool). The aim of the Tool was to provide up to date and easy to read fact sheets and templates for a range of day to day tasks necessary when establishing and/or running a general practice. Version one of the Practice Management Business Support Tool was provided in November 2011 to an international medical graduate general practitioner and his practice manager wife during their orientation week prior to their appointment as principals of a Wheatbelt general practice. The Tool is provided free on request and updated on average quarterly, with additional and revised fact sheets to maintain currency and relevancy. Now in its 15th revision, the Practice Management Business Support Tool is subscribed to by more than half of the rural general practices, Aboriginal medical services and country hospitals in Western Australia and contains more than 90 fact sheets, templates, resources, learning guides, brochures and posters. Each inclusion is also available on the Rural Health West website for non-subscribers to access free of charge.

Through practice surveys and direct contact, the Practice and Business Support Service further identified a need from practice staff for education and support in other areas. These included:

- general practice accreditation preparation
- employment contracts
- finance and billing strategies
- succession planning
- human resources
- staff training
- navigating Medicare and the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS)
- the need for support with the set-up of a new general practice, change of ownership of a practice, or business support for a general practitioner new to a practice.

Services provided

Further advancement and development of the Rural Health West Practice and Business Support Service has resulted in a comprehensive suite of resources, guides and templates which include the following.

Accreditation support

- Assistance in setting a timeline to prepare for accreditation or reaccreditation;
- Free access to the Rural Health West Policy and Procedure Practice Manual, which contains a full suite of template policies and procedures linked to The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Standards for general practices: Fourth edition;
- A mock accreditation survey in the lead up to the accreditation survey visit; and
- Follow up support to assist in the development of additional policies, procedures or training required to complete the requirements of accreditation.

Business planning

Developed in conjunction with Haydon Practice Innovations, the business planning guide and template is specifically aimed at rural, remote and outer metropolitan general medical practices. Designed to assist practices to recognise business potential and prepare for future success the plan aims to identify new opportunities and potential risks within a practice.

Set up of a new practice or change of management

Identifying the need for professional business and financial advice through the establishment of a team of external advisors (accountant, financier and legal) to assist in the evaluation of the practice standing with areas such as:

- business structure
- development of business objectives (financial, strategic and operational).

A financial audit including:

- financial planning
- payroll systems
- purchasing procedures
- reconciliation of accounts.

A review of clinical management including:

- continuity of care (handover, after-hours, etc)
- procedures and management of results, follow up, registers and recalls
- triage procedures
- clinical risk management systems.

The Practice Management Business Support Tool

The flag-ship practice and business support resource, the Practice Management Business Support Tool, contains up-to-date information on the day-to-day operations of running a rural general practice for managers and practice principals. Provided on a subscription basis and regularly updated, the tool can be ordered for free as a hard copy from Rural Health West or electronic versions can be downloaded from the Rural Health West website.

Chapters include fact sheets, learning guides and templates on:

- business management
- accreditation and standards
- Medicare Australia
- human resources
- workforce
- information technology
- outsourcing
- resources and links
- nurses in general practice
- e-health and telehealth.

Practice management and business support monthly e-bulletins

The Practice management and business support e-bulletins are sent monthly to practice managers and subscribers interested in updates relating to the MBS, the Practice Management Business Support Tool, Telehealth, training options and other related information. On average there are 240 subscribers.

Practice assessments

The Practice and Business Support team conducts a practice visit, practice staff interviews, review of processes and provides a report and follow up assistance with recommendations in areas such as:

- general practice accreditation
- business processes
- fee structures
- health promotion activities
- MBS
- patient recalls and registers
- Practice Incentives Program
- revenue enhancement
- telehealth

- utilising the practice nurse.

Human resources

In conjunction with a specialist workplace relations law firm, a suite of template employment contracts, agreements and position descriptions have been developed for:

- general practitioners (employee and independent contractor)
- medical receptionists
- practice managers
- practice nurses
- nurse practitioners.

Webinar training sessions

Providing training and continuing education for rurally located staff was identified as an early challenge. The first series of webinars in January 2012 was on a range of mainstream practice software packages. Overwhelming registrations, waiting lists and positive feedback has resulted in the expansion of this forum and one hour webinars are run delivered weekly on topics including:

- The Practice Incentives Program
- Chronic Disease Care Plans
- Business Planning
- Quality Improvement
- The Personally Controlled Electronic Health Record
- Telehealth
- Customer Service
- Front Desk Management
- Pen CAT
- Practice software packages (MMex, PracSoft, Medical Director and Best Practice).

Scholarship program for rural Aboriginal Medical Services

Scholarships are offered to permanent staff of Aboriginal Medical Services located in ASGC-RA 2 – 5 to encourage and attract quality and sustainable health workforce teams in rural and remote Western Australia. Scholarships are available annually for:

- one fully funded scholarship for medical reception training provided by Australian Medical Association (AMA) Training WA
- five scholarships to complete Certificate IV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care – Practice.

Rural General Practice Manager Award

The Rural General Practice Manager Award is an annual award with nominations accepted from practice principals, employers and staff for the outstanding services of rural general practice managers in rural Western Australia. Sponsored by MDA National and awarded in 2013, 2014 and 2015.

Case studies

Primary examples of requests for support in the startup stages of the program included:

Practice A

A Midwest practice principal seeking information on how the primarily bulk billing practice could recover funds from patients for the use of consumables such as dressings and bandages in the practice as they were losing money. Restrictions in place in the MBS prevent a practice bulk billing a patient and charging a private, non MBS rebateable, charge on the same invoice. A fact sheet and telephone support was provided to the practice nurse explaining the restrictions and what was practical to achieve. This led to a new practice procedure and development of a private fee to cover these costs.

Practice B

A Kimberley based practice was employing a practice nurse and sought assistance with identifying services the nurse could bill through Medicare, a template contract and a position description. The practice received coaching in the use of MBS nurse items (later followed by the Practice Nurse Incentive Program), nurse assisted general practitioner items such as chronic disease care plans, health assessments, spirometry and electrocardiograms (ECG). The practice was also provided with the Rural Health West resource, *Practice nurses in the general practice setting*, which identifies ways in which a practice nurse can be utilised, adding value to general practitioner care and MBS items associated with primary health care.

Example C

With the assistance of the Rural Health West recruitment team, a Wheatbelt Shire recruited the services of a new general practitioner to fill their vacant position. The overseas trained general practitioner was relocating to Western Australia and required support to understand and use the MBS, recruit staff, operate a business and explore general practice accreditation. The practice principal and the practice manager were provided with a Rural Health West orientation to Australian general practice, a practice visit, a copy of the *Practice Management Business Support Tool* and a review of potential income the practice could generate from the Practice Incentives Program if the practice underwent general practice accreditation.

Example D

A remote Aboriginal medical service in the Pilbara region due for general practice re-accreditation sought the assistance of the Practice Management Business Support Service to prepare for the reaccreditation survey visit. The team visited the clinic and conducted a mock accreditation survey. Practice policies and procedures were reviewed, staff were interviewed and those who had not been through the accreditation process before were provided an overview of what to expect and how to prepare. A report was provided following the visit which included a short list of recommendations for achievable tasks to best practice standards. The following month, the practice achieved full re-accreditation.

Example E

A general practitioner who had recently taken over the management of a Wheatbelt general practice requested assistance in identifying areas to focus on in the early stages of set up and operation. The Practice and Business Support Service team visited the practice and carried out a practice assessment which included identifying any additional equipment required to meet accreditation standards, staff training needs in the MBS and practice software, analysing potential Practice Incentives Program income, areas where a practice nurse could provide increased patient care and access to services and establishing practice procedures such as recalls and reminders, after hours arrangements, scheduling of health assessments and chronic disease care plans. The practice was also provided with a copy of the Practice Management Business Support Tool, the Policy and Procedure Practice Manual and a template business plan.

Outcomes

To date the Rural Health West Practice and Business Support Service has provided rural general practices with:

- 90 template contracts and employment agreements for practice managers, practice nurses, medical receptionists and medical practitioners
- 166 Practice Management Business Support Tools containing 91 fact sheets, resources and templates
- 68 Policy and Procedure Practice Manuals
- 36 rural and remote practice assessment visits with follow-up reports, personalised support, training and assistance
- eight fully paid scholarships for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health practitioner training in medical reception and Certificate IV in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care – Practice
- three Rural General Practice Manager of the Year awards
- 42 webinar training sessions attracting over 200 registrations.

Conclusion

The Rural Health West Practice and Business Support Service has found that there is a demonstrated need for ongoing business support for practice principals, practice managers and staff in rural and remote areas to ensure the delivery of quality, sustainable health care.

Feedback from practices reinforces that the Practice and Business Support Service has remained a relevant and comprehensive service, addressing the needs of rural general practices and building on the foundations of the established rural workforce agency relationship.

Areas identified for expansion of the program include:

- regionally based training workshops for practice principals, managers and reception staff
- access to an online practice manager forum to share information and build networking opportunities and relationships
- providing financial and educational assistance to practice staff to complete Certificate III, IV and/or Diploma level studies in business administration and practice management
- increased access to business, financial and operational planning support.

Testimonials

“Rural Health West visited our practice for a free pre-accreditation survey visit. Thanks to their tips and help, the practice was well prepared for the visit by the accreditation survey team and we gained our re-accreditation with ease.”

“Thank you for your comprehensive and insightful (practice assessment) report. It gives us a something concrete to work on.”

“This book (The Practice Management Business Support Tool) is a bible for all. Keep up the good work.”

Policy recommendations

Program specific funding for Rural Workforce Agencies to continue delivery of innovative and regionally specific general practice business support services.

References

1. Jones JA, Humphreys JS, Adena MA. Doctors' perspectives on the viability of rural practice. *Rural and Remote Health* 4: 305. (Online) 2004. Available: www.rrh.org.au
2. Harnett L. Red Tape in General Practice – a Review. September 2014. Available online www.ruralhealthwest.com.au/docs/publications/gp-red-tape_september-2014-final-2.pdf
3. Rural Health West. Minimum Data Set Report and Workforce Analysis Update: 30 November 2013. (Online) Perth, 2013 www.ruralhealthwest.com.au/who-we-are/publications
4. Porter K, Donaldson L. Meeting the business support needs of rural and remote general practice. 2009. (Online) www.nrha.org.au/11nrhc/papers/11th%20NRHC%20Porter_Kelli_C9.pdf

Presenter

Kelli Porter holds qualifications in health promotion and health policy and management. She has over 20 years' experience working in health within the government and not-for-profit sectors and in private general practice. In her role with Rural Health West as Manager Workforce Development, Kelli contributes to primary care planning for health workforce solutions in rural Western Australia, promotes rural health careers to the future health workforce, and provides business support to rural general practices.