Fostering nurse leadership in Australian rural hospitals: identification of underlying issues

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Nursing has been espoused as a profession central to continuing health care reform that is aimed at transforming health care systems to provide seamless, affordable, accessible quality care that leads to improved health outcomes (Fehr 2011). To demonstrate that nurses are industry leaders, capable of driving reform, nurses at all levels must be more assertive, vocal and visible (Barkers 2011). This stance reiterates the need for strong nursing leadership.

This study outlines the processes and outcomes of a participatory action research study undertaken to bring together rural nurse leaders to consider issues for nursing leadership in the rural context and identify underlying issues that may impact on strategies developed to foster nurse leadership in rural hospitals. Participatory action research is a process that aims to simultaneously bring about change in organisational practices and increase the understanding of social function through researchers and organisational members working as partners to change and reflect upon practice (Ragsdell 2009:568). The participatory action research group consisted of five directors of nursing from rural regions of Victoria, Australia. The group activities involved participants reflecting on their own practices, discussion and analysis of previous research, a review of current literature and critique of the activities of their organisation. The analysis of group activities resulted in the identification of five key themes: dispel the myths, adopt big-picture thinking, connect with colleagues, reflect on your own conduct, and create organisational buy-in. Discussion based on the identification of themes centred on improving the understanding of the way that rural nurses can and do impact on the evolving health care system, increasing the level of inclusion of leadership into undergraduate programs to be more than a token gesture and to prioritise planning partnerships that are developed around the existing and projected issues in rural nursing.

The process has resulted in a cohort of knowledgeable, confident current nurse leaders, who as research-aware professionals have the capacity to influence and espouse the benefits of integrating research that involves critical reflection. This study has been an example of how industry and academic nursing professionals can work together to focus on improving rural nurse leadership in a manner that is informed by research findings.