Medicare Locals—a long way in a short time

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Medicare Locals are regional primary health care organisations, set up by the Australian Government to better organise and manage local front-line health services. South West WA Medicare Local (SWWAML) was among the first group of Medicare Locals to be approved by the Australian Government.

The region covers an area surrounding the Perth metropolitan area to the south-east and north and comprises a land mass just under 200 000 square kilometres, with a population of just over 293 000 people.

The SWWAML is different to many other Medicare Locals, including:

• a large geographical area with three distinct areas each requiring a different approach
• while recognising the importance of medical practitioners in the delivery of primary health care, SWWAML is focused on all health practitioners operating in the primary health care setting
• SWWAML is undertaking a commissioning model and utilising service providers operating in the region to deliver services to communities on behalf of SWWAML.

The business model of commissioning of services presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges for the SWWAML. The opportunities include SWWAML being able to:

• focus on planning for health outcomes
• develop strategies that facilitate a range of service delivery models and allow SWWAML to play a pivotal role in the developing integrated service models
• purchase best-practice models, innovation and ensuring quality services
• develop the capacity of a small staff group to work in the areas of community engagement and clinical support and purchase services from the other service providers
• be responsive to community need.

The challenges include:

• ensuring a quality service is purchased that provides equity across the region
• establishing a robust evaluation methodology that ensures consistent and best-practice clinical governance
• ensuring that service providers promote the philosophy of SWWAML
• being able to promote the benefits of Medicare Local.
This presentation provides an overview of the model that SWWAML is developing that will provide a strong foundation for a regional approach to working across the health landscape to address health needs identified through a population health plan. There are multiple service providers, non-government organisations and all tiers of government involved in health, social services, justice and education.

Commissioning of services allows SWWAML the ability to work across sectors and contribute to the solutions needed for workforce development, capacity building for providers and assisting with the development of responsive models of care.