Interprofessional, student-assisted clinics: a solution for neurological rehab in remote Queensland?

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In north-west Queensland there are concomitant challenges surrounding access to rehabilitation for people with neurological or ageing conditions, service and staff capability and allied health student clinical placement opportunities. An innovative service response saw the birth of the North West Community Rehab project. The project utilises a service learning model to provide previously non-existent neurological rehabilitation services to people of outback north-west Queensland. It features authentic, high-quality, specialist clinical and context teaching and interprofessional learning, in a vertically integrated education model designed to build the capacity of both the current and future workforce.

Fifteen weeks of person-focused rehabilitation programs were delivered in 2012, utilising students, locally based allied health staff and specialist neurological clinicians, and comprising activities spanning prevention, early intervention, post-discharge and long-term follow-up for people with neurological and ageing conditions. Interprofessional student pairs, local clinicians and specialist staff were exposed to a range of disciplines and their contribution to rehabilitation in a remote context, developing a deeper understanding of roles and appreciation of the potential for recovery and quality of life in the north-west. Additional allied health disciplines were engaged for staff education and services.

Demand for services was high, exceeding capacity for most programs. Participant, student and service evaluations were positive with overall program ratings high. Students valued the multidisciplinary opportunity, small teams and getting to know their clients over time and in context. They felt as though they were making a difference. The model builds capacity, leaves a legacy and illustrates the feature of a successful clinical placement program. The interprofessional learning was highly valued by all and provoked an extension on the possibilities for additional disciplines to be included. The intermittent nature of the service generated challenges overcome by collaboration between organisations.

The NW Rehab project experience demonstrates that innovative service learning models can facilitate access to quality services, upskill existing rural and remote professionals and provide extended, authentic clinical teaching and life exposure to health students. It has broader applicability in a range of areas of previously non-existent services, poor access or shortages. The vertically integrated, interprofessional education model has allowed locally based clinicians to upskill in neurological rehab, specialist clinicians to gain understanding of rural/remote and Aboriginal health contexts and students to have a unique, authentic, extended specialist placement in a remote area and most importantly, people to access a vital service.