The certificate in gerontological nursing for rural and regional nurses

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Aims: To provide a hospital-run, university-accredited course designed to enhance knowledge base and advanced critical thinking skills of registered nurses working with older people in any health setting at a practical level.

Methods: The course is run over 22 weeks with a combination of face-to-face and online learning and also clinical placement. With a strong emphasis on current evidence-based practice, lectures are provided by a team of multidisciplinary experts in their field, peak body and industry representatives. Assessment tasks are aligned with current university expectations, including academic requirements, and learning outcomes.

Relevance: In Victoria, more than 46% of multi-day patient stays are for patients over the age of 70 years. Statistics released by the Department of Health in 2011 indicate that the Loddon Mallee region, which occupies more than a quarter of the area of the state, has a higher than average percentage of persons with need for assistance with core activities, and the highest percentage (among the geographical regions of Victoria) of people aged 75 or more living alone. Statistics of Australian hospitals show both the age and acuity of inpatients is increasing. Therefore the need to have a good understanding of the current issues and evidence-based practice related to nursing older people is vital. Concurrently, the need for nurses specifically trained in nursing older people is growing; however, there is a deficit of courses available to nurses with a focus on aged care and nursing older people in Victoria. Locally, there are currently no tertiary post-graduate aged care specific courses available.

Results: In the Loddon Mallee region there is increasing interest from local health services and individual registered nurses in undertaking the Certificate in Gerontological Nursing, with expressions of interest and subsequent student cohorts trending upward every year for the last five years. Student cohorts are made up of nurses working in a variety of regional and rural settings. Our data indicates an increasing interest of applicants to pursue further university study following completing this course, with more than half of the current cohort of students indicating this intention.

Conclusions: This course is going some way toward fulfilling a dire need for aged care specific training within the nursing workforce in rural and regional Victoria. Evaluation data indicates students find the course invaluable to their clinical practice.