A physician assistant working in Aboriginal health—a new approach for Australia

Nanette Laufik1,2
1Mulungu Aboriginal Corporation Health Centre, 2School of Medicine, James Cook University

Aim: To describe the role and contributions of a physician assistant (PA) currently working in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service, and share recommendations and insights for expanded implementation of the role.

Relevance: With the recent report by Health Workforce Australia endorsing the relevance of physician assistants in rural Australia, it is timely to describe the experience of a PA currently working in a rural Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service. This role, which is new to rural Australia, also serves as a model for potential career advancement for Aboriginal health workers.

Results: The classic role of the physician assistant as an extension of the supervising doctor has enabled this doctor–PA team to increase access to care planning for people with chronic disease to manage conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and rheumatic heart disease. Under the supervision of the senior medical officer, the physician assistant sees patients in the chronic disease clinic, briefs the doctor on her findings, and together they formulate the treatment plan. The efficiency of this model has resulted in improved financial performance, enabling the chronic disease clinic to be self-sufficient for medical staff. Because the physician assistant handles a large portion of the clinical commitments it has enabled the supervising doctor to devote more time to more complex cases, managerial duties and the training of medical students and junior doctors. Furthermore, the PA helps to support the system of screening of patients by Aboriginal health workers and offers direction as required. The PA also participates in the interdisciplinary teaching of both medical students and Aboriginal health workers.

Conclusions: The physician assistant is a true force multiplier, readily fitting into the rural health scheme, working closely with the senior medical officer and improving the efficiency, productivity, financial returns of this chronic disease clinic.

This experience of the physician assistant in Aboriginal care could serve as a model for other communities in bringing long-term stability and relationship building to community care, whilst improving the quality and efficiency of clinic management. It will also lead to increased and improved training opportunities for health workers, medical students and junior doctors.