

New South Wales rural and remote communities' perception of health telephone support services

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It has long been recognised that there are inequalities in the use of mental health services across Australia and specifically in rural versus urban communities. Numerous factors have been identified as contributing to this inequity, including physical access to appropriate mental health care services; social stigma; agrarian values; and affordability.

In an attempt to address some of these barriers, a number of telehealth and e-mental health services have been introduced such as telephone support/triage, and internet based e-mental health resources and service delivery. While there is some research regarding the efficacy of these services, there appears to be limited exploration of community perception of these types of support. Such research would be useful, as recent evidence suggests the growing number and types of these services available may be confusing to community members and creating difficulties for service providers in establishing an authoritative presence.

The following paper outlines a research project exploring the perception of health—including mental health telephone support services—available to rural and remote communities in NSW. Surveys and interview data obtained from residents and service providers are reported, including knowledge and awareness of support types and availability, in addition to perceptions of need for such services. Knowledge, awareness and likelihood of using mental health telephone support services versus other health support services, are also explored alongside usage data from the Rural Mental Health Support Line.

The research provides an evidence base for marketing, provision and development of mental health focused telephone support services for rural and remote communities in NSW. Targeting service delivery at the perceptions and aspirations of community members and service providers will encourage more relevant, useful and widely accessed mental health telephone support services in the future.