Phase one of a cluster randomised trial to prevent weight gain in women living in rural communities

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Halting weight gain in those who are currently normal weight as well as those who are overweight or obese is one of the most critical public health priorities currently facing Australia. Women are at greater risk of obesity than men, and rural women represent a particularly high-risk group, gaining greater weight than their urban counterparts. Despite the recognised need, few weight gain prevention interventions in adults have been reported. Our group has previously developed a weight gain prevention intervention for women living in a metropolitan area (HeLP-her), which showed a significant difference between the intervention and control groups (adjusted -1.13 kg, CI -2.03 to -0.24) at one year. We have now adapted this evidence-based program for delivery to women in rural communities. The primary aim of this HeLP-her rural project is to determine if a one-year behavioural intervention plus one year observation prevents weight gain and improves health-related behaviours in women living in small rural communities in Australia.

Between September 2011 and March 2012 we aim to recruit 840 women aged between 18 and 50 years living in 42 small rural towns and deliver phase one of the project. In this cluster randomised trial the item of randomisation (or cluster) is the town, with data analysed at the individual level. Primary endpoints are measured weight change and secondary end-points are diet and physical activity behaviours, self-management behaviours and quality of life measured at baseline, one year and two years. Community prevention interventions in real-life settings are complex and challenging to deliver. We have successfully engaged multiple sectors within the 42 target communities, including local government, health and education. The recruitment is occurring as planned and we will discuss program delivery and baseline data. To our knowledge this is the largest lifestyle-based randomised controlled trial to prevent weight gain in adults in Australia and the learnings from this project will impact on population weight gain prevention strategies nationally.