An exploration of violence experienced by professionals from three sectors delivering key services in rural and remote workplaces

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Background: This paper will report the outcomes of the first stage of the ‘Working safe in rural and remote Australia’ project. This project is the result of collaboration between the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA), Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM), Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), Police Federation of Australia (PFA), Queensland Teacher’s Union (QTU) and Council of Remote Area Nurses Australia Plus (CRANAPlus).

The key aims of this project were to understand, identify and, investigate the safety of workplaces in rural and remote Australia.

Method: The first stage of the project was to learn more about workplace violence in rural and remote Australia through an online survey and a review of grey and black literature. This included reports, electronic databases, and a stakeholder survey.

Results: Evidence from the survey of 600 workers suggests that perception of risk of violence was key to participants’ decision making around retention. The literature examined offered information on the incidence, prevalence and impact of the violence experienced by professionals delivering key services in rural and remote workplaces, as well as the perceived and actual risks, causes of violence, levels of cooperation across the three sectors, and barriers to cooperation.

Risk factors were identified that appeared unique to the rural and remote setting.

Conclusions: The incidence and prevalence estimates appeared unreliable without uniform data collection standards. This was compounded by an under-reporting of violence in the workplace and ambiguity surrounding definitions of workplace violence. Violence prevention strategies must be multifaceted and consider individual, organisational and situational factors to be effective.

Relevance to practice: As a result of this research, an online portal has been developed for employers and professionals working in rural and remote Australia that is a ‘one-stop shop’ for information, case studies of cross sector cooperation and links on workplace violence.

Accessing strategies and stories of other communities and employers’ approaches to workplace violence is both enabling and important. Minimising and mitigating the risk of occupational violence in rural communities remains core business for communities, employers and professionals in the rural and remote sector. It will support greater retention of an experienced and sustainable workforce in rural and remote areas and, involve heightened community awareness of violence as a public health issue.