Multidisciplinary therapy services for children with feeding disorders in country South Australia

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This project aimed to map the patterns of service delivery and quality of therapy services provided to children with feeding disorders across country South Australia, and make recommendations around training needs and service models for clinicians working with this group.

The results will be particularly relevant to rural multidisciplinary paediatric therapy teams working with children with feeding disorders, including fussy eating, complex feeding disorders, tube-fed clients and infant feeding disorders.

Rural health services can have limited access to specialist services and experienced staff. Country Health SA allied health workers identified this as a factor impacting on services to increasing numbers of children referred with complex feeding disorders. This can be a high-risk group of clients, requiring specialist skills and time-intensive input. A study into this issue was driven by the Country Health SA clinical senior speech pathologist, dietitian and occupational therapist with a defined ‘portfolio’ in paediatric feeding, appointed under the evolving Allied Health Professional Clinical Governance Structure.

A survey was developed aiming to collect quantitative and qualitative data on a range of factors relating to services provided to paediatric feeding clients in country South Australia. This was delivered by email across Country Health SA to occupational therapists, speech pathologists, dietitians, physiotherapists, social workers and allied health assistants, with a particular focus on those with a paediatric workload.

The survey—the first of its kind conducted in rural settings in South Australia—provides a unique insight into factors relating to services provided to paediatric feeding clients, including:

- the frequency and types of services provided to clients with different types of feeding issues (fussy eating, complex feeding disorders, tube-fed clients and infant feeding disorders)
- trends affecting service delivery by discipline, location and clinician experience
- the extent of multidisciplinary collaboration, evidence base, and evaluation of feeding services
- training completed in the area of paediatric feeding
- the confidence of clinicians in providing support for a range of feeding issues
- self-identified needs to improve worker confidence and competence.
We will present conclusions drawn from survey results around the strengths and gaps in services currently provided to complex paediatric feeding clients in country South Australia. Recommendations will be shared around training, competency and resource needs for allied health clinicians and consistent service models for working with children with feeding disorders, with a focus on improving quality of services and subsequently reducing clinical risk.