Designing whole-of-system placements for undergraduate medical, nursing and allied health students in rural settings

Natalie Radomski¹, Amanda Watson², Geoff Solarsh¹, Les Fitzgerald³, Carol McKinstrey⁴, Linda Mckenna²

¹Monash University, School of Rural Health—Bendigo Regional Clinical School, ²Castlemaine Health, ³Department of Rural Nursing and Midwifery, La Trobe Rural Health School, ⁴La Trobe Rural Health School, La Trobe University

Background: Funded by the Victorian Department of Health, the ‘Whole-of-System’ Student Clinical Placement Project (WoSSP) focuses on the challenges and needs of smaller rural health services when teaching health professional students in community-based placements. The WoSSP model has a unique focus on broadening student understandings of patient-centred care, health service complexity and interprofessional practice. Our intention is to encourage a deeper understanding of the bio-psycho-social dimensions of health care within a geographically defined health system. Project partners include the local rural hospital and the two major university health education providers in the region. Community and health service representatives are involved as project steering group/advisory group members.

Project deliverables include strategies for cross-disciplinary curriculum customisation and WoS placement coordination. A core goal is to enable students to gain a deeper appreciation of patient health care journeys (including the contributions of other health professionals and barriers to health service access).

Methods: This paper reports on the features of the evolving WoSSP model and presents preliminary program evaluation data that maps how a workable interprofessional clinical placement strategy was developed. A written questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with student, health service and teaching staff participants were used to inform WoSSP program implementation across two action research pilots during 2012. We were particularly interested in investigating if/how the WoSSP program contributed to student educational outcomes.

Results and discussion: One of the challenges of implementing sustainable clinical placement innovations in smaller rural settings is the need to move beyond siloed approaches to teaching and placement planning. Substantial organisational and educational change work is required to embed collaborative, interprofessional placement models across different health settings. The WoSSP project is tackling clinical placement complexities at the health service/health education interface. Prior to WoSSP, there was no shared mechanism that brought health practitioners, supervisors, students, community members and health education providers together to have direct involvement in shaping locally customised clinical education strategies. This mutual professional engagement cycle has the potential to drive information exchange and health service linkages that can inform theory and practice and increase workforce capacity.