Giving rural children the best chance: improving multidisciplinary screening strategies

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This presentation outlines the journey of the Royal Far West (RFW) to increasing the disclosure requirements within the intake process and developing direct, closer liaison with referrers and local service providers to help ensure that the intake process includes a holistic assessment of the child within the broader family context.

The RFW is a children’s health care service charity that offers a secondary referral service for children living in remote and very remote NSW, and a tertiary referral and multidisciplinary developmental assessment service for children with developmental, behavioural and mental health concerns. These children have limited or no access to local services due to their rural and remote locations.

Utilising a grant from the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs under the Child Aware Approaches initiative, RFW took an action research approach to reviewing and enhancing their screening processes to improve the delivery of health services.

The RFW journey used a cyclical period of observation, reflection and action supported by literature reviews and evidence-based best practice to lead to a strengthened screening tool and intake procedures. Having the right questions, and knowing how to ask them, enables health services working with children in rural and remote areas to better identify health issues and approaches to care tailored for the children, their families and their communities. RFW has been able to improve the development of achievable and targeted plans that support improved outcomes for the young people requiring their services through the strengthening of local partnerships and better identification of service gaps.

The presentation shares the evidence and experience gained through the research and the implementation of multidisciplinary screening strategies and tools. It explores the key challenges and successes achieved when developing screening tools and processes that are appropriate for children living in rural and remote areas (and how they differ from strategies used in urban areas).

The improvement made through the multidisciplinary screening approach within the RFW have helped to inform and improve the health performance outcomes of country children accessing RFW services and have progressed an integrated model of care for improved safety and wellbeing of the children. It also builds the capacity of families, local communities and partnership with local referrers, health agencies, schools and community groups.