Reaching ‘in’ remote technologies and service delivery in rural and remote communities

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Women’s Health and Family Services (WHFS) is the largest women’s health centre in Western Australia, providing health and wellbeing services to women, their families and communities. WHFS has a number of specialist programs in the following service areas: medical and health, alcohol and other drugs, family and domestic violence, mental health, community development and Aboriginal family support.

Often rural and remote communities are too small to support traditional models of health delivery locally, so residents must access care from larger urban centres. Unfortunately, access to health services provided in larger centres remains a problem for many residents of isolated settlements. In many cases, their inability to access health services when required results in health needs not being adequately met, lack of continuity of care and an absence of monitoring of the effectiveness of services in terms of health outcomes. It is clear that models of care in rural and remote areas must differ from those in metropolitan communities, incorporating strategies to account for these problems. WHFS endeavoured to develop a service delivery model that challenged the traditional delivery methods by developing an innovative and creative program that attempted to meet communities’ specific needs and gaps in service provision.

After extensive planning and consultation with key stakeholders, including over thirty community resource centres across WA, regional commissions, regional women’s health centres, WA country health and the Department of Regional Development and Lands, WHFS launched its Rural in Reach Program. The first of its kind in WA, the program uses the latest videoconferencing communication technology, to deliver long-distance one-on-one counselling, family consultations and group education sessions with trained professionals to over thirty rural towns across WA. Nearing a year of service provision the program is now set to expand to 60 rural communities at the beginning of 2013. Major successes of the program include the continued engagement, and the trust and relationship building that has developed between the Rural in Reach Program staff and the participating CRCs. Through consultation and feedback, challenges presented have not been seen as a barrier but as an opportunity to ensure that the program is consistently evolving to meet community needs.