Promoting best practice in the provision of rural mental health student placements

Louise Roufeil¹, Fiona Little²
¹Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health, James Cook University, ²University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health—Tamworth

Building an adequate and appropriately skilled health workforce to service regional, rural and remote Australia has been at the core of efforts to address inequities in health outcomes between urban and non-metropolitan environments. Multiple strategies have been considered to develop health workforce capacity, including the expansion of rural placements for students. In 2012 the Mental Health Tertiary Curriculum (MHTC) project commenced to explore the unique features of mental health clinical placements across regional, rural and remote Australia. Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and using the eleven University Departments of Rural Health, the project aimed to develop a deeper understanding of rural mental health placements.

Rural placements are thought to offer students a chance to experience rural practice and lifestyle with opportunity for wider scope in clinical and interprofessional practice and community engagement. Evidence is accumulating that the quality of the student experience on placement is paramount to equip the emerging workforce to adapt to rural practice. Little is known, however, about the factors that contribute to a quality rural placement, particularly in the mental health sector. The MHTC project surveyed and interviewed education providers, service providers and students across rural Australia. Qualitative and quantitative data highlighted the student learning experience, barriers and enablers to effective placements and unique features of rural and remote mental health practice.

The findings from the MHTC project emphasise the importance of maintaining relationships and defining expectations between education and service providers to adequately prepare students for placement. Of critical importance to students are the quality of supervision and the culture of the service provider in terms of their acknowledgment of the importance of students to the overall values of the organisation. Students report that understanding of and connection to community is a vital component of rural mental health placements and that they need to be supported to develop this capacity alongside the development of their clinical skills.

Based on the findings of the MHTC project, this paper will present ten essential ingredients that are necessary to provide students with an authentic and well-supported rural clinical placement. It is intended these recommendations will maximise the potential for students to gain the foundational knowledge to effectively deal with mental health presentations upon entry to the workforce. The recommendations presented will be of interest and benefit to the academic sector, service providers and health professionals who support students in their workplace.