Under watchful eyes: clinicians’ perceptions of the use of online mental health resources in the rural context

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Recent years have seen the development of a number of online mental health resources, which can be accessed for internet-based treatment of conditions including anxiety, depression and phobias. Some have suggested that these resources may assist in the delivery of rural mental health services. Research has established the efficacy of online mental health resources, but little is known about clinicians’ perceptions of effectiveness, particularly in the rural context. Referral patterns will likely depend on clinician perceptions of the effectiveness of online mental health resources.

Twenty rural clinicians (primarily psychologists and general practitioners) were recruited for individual interviews and focus groups, exploring perceptions of online mental health resources, factors influencing referral and factors specific to their use in the rural and remote context.

Most clinicians were aware of some of the available resources, and referred some clients to the resources. Interprofessional differences in referral practices were explained in terms of different case mixes for psychologists and general practitioners. Clinicians were generally optimistic about using the resources, particularly as an adjunct to face-to-face therapy. Specific benefits included access for remote clients, user anonymity and the potential for psycho-education to normalise symptoms and encourage further help-seeking. Concerns included the lack of follow up, reinforcement of social isolation, and potential for misinterpretation of web-based information leading to adverse effects. Many of these concerns were allayed if the resources were employed as an adjunct, rather than alternative, form of therapy.

Online mental health resources show promise in helping to overcome barriers in accessing mental health services in the rural context.