MEDIA RELEASE

Child’s play at the 12th Conference

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Maria Montessori and others have asserted that ‘play is the work of the child’. A number of presenters at the 12th National Rural Health Conference that begins this weekend in Adelaide will attest to the value of play for improving the health of children in rural and remote Australia.

According to Laura Robinson and Andrew Heath, children’s games and play activities can deliver important health messages about nutrition and eating well, washing hands and brushing teeth, caring for skin, hair and eyes, and keeping a clean community. In this way, play can contribute to reducing chronic childhood diseases. Laura Robinson will describe the work (and games) of Captain Starlight in the Northern Territory in health promotion and Healthy School Aged Screening. She will describe how distraction through play can alleviate boredom for children waiting at clinics and thereby encourage attendance. “It is also important in decreasing anxiety by giving the child back a sense of control through meaningful activities,” Laura says.

In a separate presentation, Andrew Heath will report on the Pilbara Healthy Kids Initiative which provides children with “an enjoyable fun day” that returns key health outcomes for children and their families.

Judi Parsons, a paediatric Registered Nurse and Play Therapist, has seen how games can help children cope with fear and minimise pain associated with procedures. Judi says that play has been identified as a children’s nursing competency yet it receives little attention in Australia. “Play can also contribute to the child’s understanding and expectations about what is involved, promote relaxation and relieve distress,” Judi says. She will talk about using a “magic glove”, a calico doll and play doh, slime, clay and squishy squashy toys to help children needing care.

Engaging with children in play is a two-way process in which parents and health professionals can learn as well. Semi-structured play can reveal insights into the child’s feelings and thought processes, as well as giving opportunity for gentle social and interactive modelling for parents. Play2Grow playgroups in Clare Valley in South Australia support families with complex care needs. In rural situations staff availability often means responsibilities must be shared, so the play program is developed around a “transdisciplinary model of care” in which boundaries between disciplines are intentionally blurred. Katrina Wilkop will report that positive outcomes for families with complex needs have been beyond expectation.

Kirralee Moores will report on Play Picnics which aim to help families overcome a range of children’s eating difficulties. At Play Picnics, children are encouraged to explore food and food utensils in their own way; they are not expected to eat. Parents are encouraged to provide Play Picnics at home. Kirralee’s presentation will conclude that the model has produced successful and lasting results and can be easily replicated.

The 12th Conference begins next Sunday, 7 April. See the program at www.ruralhealth.org.au

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For information on rural and remote health in Australia, visit

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