The role of nurse practitioners in a rural primary health care setting

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The nurse practitioner (NP) role has been established in Australia for over a decade, yet despite its legal recognition, many health care professionals and much of the Australian public have little understanding of the role. Research from Australia and internationally has confirmed that NPs are safe, competent and provide quality health care that is economical and valued. Current published research is predominantly focused on NPs providing care in acute settings. Absent from the current literature is an in depth study of the key components of how these roles are implemented in primary health care settings.

The Nimbin Integrated Services Project (NIS) is an innovative community originated and based mental health initiative which aims to provide mental health services to the community of Nimbin, a small town on the north coast of NSW. The NIS consists of a full time NP specialising in mental health who is permanently based in a well used and multi functional non-health community organisation. The NIS model works through close street based contact with the community and offers accessible flexible support to clients with a range of mental health and/or drug and alcohol problems. The NIS includes a proactive and preventative approach. This study describes the role of the NP through an exploration of the perceptions of healthcare providers and analysis of quantitative data.

The study demonstrated that clients were willing to access the NP service. There was a consistently high level of usage. One third of clients were self-referred. The location of the NP service in a non-government organisation was perceived to contribute to the acceptance of the service. The study provided evidence of integration between services. Changes in hospitalisation before and after the establishment of the service showed a statistically significant reduction in mental health and assault hospital presentations. Participants reported a reduction of violence in the town.

There were no similar models described in the literature on the dimensions of originating from the community, being led by a NP, and being located in a non health community organisation. The NP appears to be a valued and well used service demonstrating the use of nurse practitioners in a primary health care setting.