Fostering nurse leadership in Australian rural hospitals: identification of the underlying issues

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This presentation outlined the processes and outcomes of a participatory action research study undertaken to bring together rural nurse leaders to consider issues for nursing leadership in the rural context and identify underlying issues that may impact on strategies developed to foster nurse leadership in rural hospitals. Nursing has been espoused as a profession central to continuing health care reform that is aimed at transforming health care systems to provide seamless, affordable, accessible quality care that leads to improved health outcomes (Fehr 2011). The key message in this presentation was to demonstrate to the audience that nurses working in rural and remote Australia are industry leaders, capable of driving reform, who need to be assertive, vocal and visible. The findings of this study reiterate the need for strong nursing leadership. The research was undertaken using participatory action research. This process was explained as a way to bring about change in organisational practices and increase the understanding of social function. The participatory action research group consisted of five Directors of Nursing from rural regions of Victoria, Australia. The group activities involved participants reflecting on their own practices, discussion and analysis of previous research, a review of current literature and critique of the activities of their organisation. The analysis of group activities resulted in the identification of five key themes; dispel the myths, adopt big picture thinking, connect with colleagues, reflect on your own conduct and create organisational buy-in. The presentation discussed the themes and centred on improving the understanding of the way that rural nurses can and do impact on the evolving health care system, increasing the level of inclusion of leadership into undergraduate programs to be more than a token gesture and to prioritise planning partnerships that are developed around the existing and projected issues in rural nursing. This study has been an example of how industry and academic nursing professionals can work together to focus on improving rural nurse leadership in a manner that is informed by research findings.