Patient Liaison Network—improving the journey for country patients having to travel to access health care

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Introduction
The Country Patient Journey initiative commenced in July 2006 following the formation of Country Health SA. The aim of the initiative was to improve the outcomes for people living in Country South Australia needing to access health services locally, regionally and from Adelaide-based services.

The key objectives being to:
- reduce the number of avoidable referrals for country residents to Adelaide-based health services
- decrease the length of time country residents spend in Adelaide hospitals
- improve the ‘journey’ for people from country S.A. needing to travel away from home to access health services
- improve the preparedness of country residents in returning home from Adelaide; improved discharge planning
- facilitate the improvement and development of appropriate health services and networks across Country South Australia.

The vision encompassed two main goals:

1. Improved health and wellbeing outcomes for all people living in country South Australia.
   This involves people being able to access safe and quality care near home whenever possible and ensuring that when people do need to travel to access services, the journey is smooth and supported.

2. People living in rural and remote areas of South Australia have access to information about health services available to them locally, regionally and in Adelaide.

Over the last six years of the country patient journey, the work has become less of an ‘initiative’ and more the principles inherent in improving health outcomes for people from country SA and increasing access to services closer to home. Metropolitan and country health services have a raised awareness of the needs of people travelling to access health services and some of the strategies to improve access and reduce the number of journeys. Country Health SA Local Health Network (CHSALHN) provided a key contact and coordinating point for all health service providers (including many from interstate) to support the SA country patient journey, enabling improved communication, partnerships and acting as a resource for both country and metropolitan based health services.

The shift has been evident in the work of the Patient Liaison Network (PLN) where initial discussions in late 2006 focussed on metropolitan services versus country and metropolitan health units ‘pushing’ people out; an us and them mentality. Now the discussions are about one health system where the points of care are linked for people needing to access services at different points. Part of this work has involved challenging myths and misconceptions about health units as separate entities, admitting and discharging practices, and referral processes.

Advocating on behalf of country health services, increasing awareness of services available closer to where people live and informing all involved in supporting country patient journeys have been important strategies.
The Patient Journey provides a horizontal and vertical approach to building a supportive network across all health services as well as addressing individual issues and forming positive pathways for groups of country South Australians – including people from Aboriginal backgrounds, older people, children and families, people with mental illness and people living in remote locations.

**Rural liaison nurses and patient liaison positions**

The evolution of rural liaison nurses in metropolitan hospitals and patient liaison positions in country hospitals were identified as being integral to supporting country patient journeys. The aim has been to establish rural liaison nurse positions at all major metropolitan public hospitals and to identify and further develop positions at all country health sites, forming a network of support for country patients.

All major public hospitals within the metropolitan area have rural liaison nurses or patient liaison contacts in place. All country hospitals have identified a patient liaison contact from within existing staff, alongside nurses and allied health staff in community health, many of whom are actively identifying and transferring patients back to country hospitals and communities, and seeking opportunities to support access to services closer to home. Together they form the Patient Liaison Network.

Liaison nurses are the central contact for country clients and:

- facilitate communications between country and metropolitan health services
- promote access to care options closer to home
- create awareness of the issues faced by country clients accessing health services outside their area
- advocate to support a return home from metropolitan hospitals
- resource person for services available to assist the patient journey
- ensure discharge planning processes occur in a timely manner.

Rural liaison nurses in metropolitan hospitals have reported that providing a key contact and transition point within country health units for metropolitan services to contact, results in stronger linkages and improved communication between points of care. The Patient Liaison Network is well established and provides a vital network for country patients. Members of the network actively seeking opportunities to avoid hospital admissions, especially into metropolitan hospitals.

There are well documented benefits of a liaison role:

- better coordination of transfer of care
- facilitate a smooth transition, linking points of care
- a central contact and coordinating point for services to contact
- timely and accurate detailed referrals
- improved patient outcomes.

**Use of the Operational Business Intelligence (OBI) Dashboard**

The OBI Dashboard is a web based tool providing information about inpatients in metropolitan hospitals with stays greater than one day in the areas of acute, including mental health patients in identified wards and Glenside Hospital, palliative care, rehabilitation and maintenance. Country patients are ‘flagged’ at broad category level and postcode. It was decided to provide a group of people within CHSA access to a ‘drill-down’ function to access individual patient level information about patients from their region enabling active facilitation of transfers back to country SA.
Access to patient level data was restricted to those people who required information for transfer of clinical care of patients between metropolitan hospitals and country SA. Patient liaison contacts in country hospitals involved in facilitating the Patient Journey and actively transferring patients back to country, were granted access.

The OBI Dashboard has proven to be an excellent resource for country hospitals to allow viewing of local patients in metropolitan health units, monitoring the patient’s progress and initiating transfers back to country locations.

The Country Health SA LHN Nursing and Midwifery Transfer Form
An early issue identified by the Patient Liaison Network was the need to increase consistency of information provided on the transfer of patients between health units. Each country hospital previously used their own form when transferring patients to another hospital or residential care facility. In 2008 the Country Health SA LHN Nursing and Midwifery Transfer Form was developed for all country hospitals to utilise. The feedback received from rural liaison nurses at metropolitan sites was extremely positive, in consideration to the content and use of this form.

The use of this standardised form by country health units provides consistent information relevant for continuity of care of patients on transfer to a metropolitan health unit, another country health unit or residential care facility.

This form is now also used by metropolitan hospitals as a form of communication when requesting a return transfer to country locations, improving the quality of clinical handover.

Outpatient and follow-up services
The Patient Liaison Network has worked closely with metropolitan outpatient services to identify opportunities to reduce the journeys for people from country SA. This has been achieved through increased access to services close to home, and through the use of alternative methods (eg telemedicine/videoconferencing).

An example of this is the introduction of a process in the Royal Adelaide Hospital of utilising x-rays for reviewing orthopaedic patients rather than every patient needing to travel to Adelaide for follow-up in the outpatient clinic.

The Patient Journey Communiqué
The Communiqué is a monthly publication promoting programs and strategies initiated to improve health service access and decrease the number of journeys for country patients. It is distributed to approximately 750 people on direct email lists, and uploaded onto the CHSALHN Web site where it is accessible to everyone. Positive feedback has been received from many recipients of the Communiqué including many requests from interstate colleagues seeking information about the country Patient Journey, and the Network.

Transfer of care
To ensure that local health teams have the skills to enable safe and quality health services in country SA, linkages between metropolitan hospitals and country health services are facilitating training opportunities and providing additional clinical support when required.

Examples of this include:

- training provided for country staff to enable patients requiring peritoneal dialysis to return home
- wound care nurse specialists throughout country
- burns link nurses at all regional centres
• nurse-led vascular access service for peripherally inserted venous catheters and midlines
• stomal therapy nurses
• PEG nurse specialist nurses.

Other clinical support, ‘just in time training’, has been provided as relevant and appropriate to enable the transfer of care.

Out of Hospital Strategies, such as Better Care in the Community, the Country Nurse Initiative, and the Rapid Intensive Brokerage Support (RIBS) have also been working towards improving flexibility and responsiveness, as well as an increased capacity of primary care services to be able to respond to the needs of clients, as well as to provide services close to where they live. This avoids the need for hospital admission. These have been developed in response to issues identified through close collaboration with country health services and General Practitioners.

**Consumer information and health literacy**

A significant component of health literacy is the ability to navigate the health system.

Information has been developed for country consumers to assist them to ask questions and seek information to enable informed decision making about accessing health services, as well as information to assist their journey when needing to travel to access these services.

Examples include two brochures ‘Before You Travel For Medical Care’ and ‘Contacts For When You Travel’, available on the Country Health SA web site.

There are many more examples of initiatives and strategies to improve the journey for country patients having to travel to access health services locally, regionally or to Adelaide based services.

The Patient Liaison Network Coordinator’s role was introduced in 2010 to provide essential support for patient liaison nurses and other health professionals, to develop and disseminate information supporting positive patient journeys and ensure that the Patient Liaison Network continued to have active engagement in the coordination of patient journeys.

Advocacy about patient journey issues, and a stronger patient-centred-care focus, has resulted in significant improvements across country and metropolitan health services for individual patients.

This paper will present the progress so far, documented benefits and key achievements.