Responding to child abuse and neglect: what primary health practitioners need to know

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This presentation was based on the understanding that the context in which many health professionals work in remote Australia can be challenging. Not only because of sensitivity and scrutiny of child abuse and neglect but also because of the remote context. In remote Australia, most of our clients are Indigenous, and the barriers that can apply to the ability to offer comprehensive primary health care apply in this situation as well.

We described the development of a federally funded program that allowed us to offer two day workshops across major communities across the Northern Territory. While core content was fixed, we were able to be flexible with our methods of delivery thus catering to a wide range of health providers across different levels of experience, knowledge and cognitive ability. Since 2009 over 700 participants have attended and all workshops have been evaluated.

Evaluation has historically been scant in the area both in Australia and internationally. While not “one size fits all” there are lessons that can be learnt and answers provided to “what works best and in what context”? The program has integrated process, impact and outcome evaluation into a continuous and thus responsive quality assurance model. Outcome evaluation, has allowed us to follow a number of participants for up to six months following the workshop in order to measure the level of impact their attendance has made to their work practice and if indeed they have been able to use the knowledge with the families they work with.

Feedback has overwhelmingly shown us that training of this nature benefits from having multidisciplinary participants, including members of the community who are in the “front” line of a variety of children’s services as well as clinical and specialist staff. The working through, in small groups of complex case studies gives not only knowledge but also allows participants to see how members of other disciplines logically work through to action or a conclusion. Apart from providing up to date information on topics such as mandatory reporting, the two days also focused on prevention, parenting and networking all within the remote context.

In this area of practice it can only be of benefit for children living in unsafe environments, to have around them, locals, both health professionals and community members that are confident in dealing with often complex ethical and professional dilemmas when forming an opinion about child abuse and neglect.