

Making after hours primary care sustainable in the Grampians region

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Aim: To assist regional and rural GP's in the Grampians region to sustainably provide after-hours services to the local community whilst managing demand on local Emergency Departments.

Methods: Supporting and promoting the use of a single after-hours number 1800 022 222 by practices and Health Services for patients and visitors to ensure callers are initially triaged over the phone by trained telephone triage service providers (Nurse On Call and After Hours GP Helpline). Once a caller has been triaged as needing face to face care, we utilise an existing local call centre provider to provide a centralised care coordination service to assist patients to the right point of care.

We negotiated with General Practice, local Health Services and the telephone triage service providers (Nurse On Call, After Hours GP Helpline and Ambulance Victoria) to obtain their commitment to supporting the centralised care coordination service. Known as a Patient Streaming Service (PSS), this service ensures care is coordinated with local providers so that callers go to the most appropriate point of care based on real time service capacity and capability.

Results: In the last 12 months, 18,480 calls have been received from the region to the 1800 022 222 number. After phone-based health professional assessment, 385 callers required care coordination through PSS to the on-call GP. These callers were identified through an extensive triage process as patients who needed to be seen by the GP in the after-hours period.

The balance of the calls was managed by the triage providers over the phone with home care advice. Prior to the commencement of our service the majority of these calls would have gone directly to the local GP's who are often the VMOs for their local Health Service or the nurses in these Health services. Low acuity presentations decreased at both Emergency Departments (Horsham 213 less; Ballarat 2792 less) compared to the previous 12 months.

Conclusions: By utilising existing providers we have designed a fully integrated after hours system that is effective at reducing the demand on the on-call GP in our rural areas making the provision of after-hours services more sustainable as well as reducing the Emergency Department demand.