

Preparing rural health services for climate change

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Climate change threatens to have adverse health consequences for rural Australians. The pre-existing health disadvantage of those living in rural communities leads to an increased vulnerability to the health impacts of climate change. There have been calls for an integrated assessment of the impacts of climate change in rural Australia and community-based research involving rural stakeholders to develop adaptive strategies for climate change.

The World Health Organisation has emphasised the importance of regional assessment of the health impacts of climate change and has highlighted the need for research identifying knowledge gaps. Investigating the role of health services in the broader public health response to climate change is a research priority identified in the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Plan. This study examined rural Health Service Manager (HSM) attitudes and recommendations towards climate change and its impact on health by administering a survey to rural HSMs in the south west of NSW. HSMs play a crucial role in rural health service planning and management, and also hold a respected role within their local community; warranting an investigation of their knowledge and perceptions on climate change and extreme weather, and a summary of their recommendations. This study builds on a previous study in the region examining the perceptions and recommendations of General Practitioners. This additional study enables comparison and the development of a comprehensive overview of the perceptions of local health leaders towards preparing rural health services for extreme weather and climate change.

The study will lead to an improved understanding of HSM perceptions of the impact of climate change on health in rural communities. The information gathered will assist in the development of adaptation plans for health services in rural Australia with particular regional relevance in the south west of NSW. An incidental benefit may be the raised awareness of rural health service managers of the interactions between climate change and health.