

What oral health services do rural communities think they need?

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Oral health is an essential part of general health and well-being and enables individuals to eat, speak and socialise without pain, discomfort or embarrassment. Dental caries (tooth decay) is one of Australia's most prevalent health problems with the burden of tooth loss and untreated tooth decay much higher for people living in rural areas. Risk factors such as unhealthy lifestyles, limited availability and accessibility of oral health services in addition to socio-behavioural and environmental factors all contribute to poor oral health.

The Rural Engaging Communities in Oral Health (ECOH) is an NHMRC partnership project which aims to invite local people in six rural communities across Victoria and Queensland to engage in discussions about what their community needs and contribute to the design of evidence based initiatives to address oral health challenges. The study was designed to systematically evaluate the usefulness of an evidence-based method of community participation that has been successfully used in the United Kingdom called 'Remote Service Futures'.

The 'Remote Service Futures' method comprised of representatives from local community organisations, service providers and community members participating in a series of four workshops. The structured workshops explored community perceptions of oral health, local oral health services, views on strategies to improve oral health in their community and a planning exercise to develop an oral health plan. The oral health plans were then implemented and community members are currently monitoring implementation.

Data collection to date includes evidence generated from the workshop series including the oral health plans, completed oral health surveys and interviews with community members and key stakeholders. Findings indicated that communities recognised the importance of oral health in maintaining overall well-being and the role of prevention to achieve good oral health. The community-led oral health plans focused on initiatives that were based on local knowledge, sustainable and aimed to empower communities.

To date this three-year study has generated extensive evidence on the value of communities working together to bring different perspectives on the issue of oral health. The study contributes to knowledge on testing new methods for collaborative health planning. Furthermore evidence to date suggests that this method of community participation for local health planning can enable communities to identify what is most important to them in terms of their specific health needs rather than relying on a one size fits all approach.

Presenter

Dr Karen Carlisle holds an adjunct senior research fellow position at the College of Medicine and Dentistry at James Cook University and is a research coordinator at Townsville Mackay Medicare Local. She has research experience within health, education and psychology settings with particular skills and experience in collaboration to improve health access and outcomes for the underserved and at risk. Karen is currently working on an NHMRC partnership grant on community engagement in oral health within rural communities.