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Starting a remote academic centre ... the trials and tribulations

Tara Walker

North West Academic Centre, NSW

Universities have a critical role in acting as agents of change, promoting knowledge development, change, and knowledge dissemination. To apply this in a remote context, universities need to move away from being enclaves of ethereal knowledge, and become skilled in community development and empowerment. To reach an interdisciplinary collaboration, universities must develop a learning model that reflects their expertise and that of the local communities. With this in mind, The North West Academic Centre (NWAC) was started in 2017. The establishment also enabled the University of Sydney's Broken Hill University Department of Rural Health (BH UDRH) to meet the requirements of the Commonwealth Department of Health's Rural Multidisciplinary Training (RHMT) Program to *'improve the recruitment and retention of medical, dental, nursing and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia'*. In essence, making the NWAC a 'hub' of the UDRH-Broken Hill. It started with a Director, and staffing today is the Director, Project Officer and part time Allied Health facilitator.

The NWAC is based in Bourke, and supports all health students in the surrounding towns of Brewarrina, Walgett, Cobar and Lightning Ridge. The aim is to connect students with innovative industry partners and equip them with transferable skills in innovative and critical thinking. Through the available placement programs, students can develop creative ideas and innovative thinking through a range of modalities. To create such models, universities are starting to establish multidisciplinary centres that aim to develop scholars who learn their craft, but also support the needs of the local communities.

For the NWAC to be successful, it was important to consider how the stake holder focus would be managed and ongoing review, incorporating the underpinnings of the BHUDRH strategic plan in the activities of the NWAC, as well as developing sound systems of evaluation and accountability. External relationships with other like centres was important as well as keeping stake holders and community invested the following. These factors needed to be woven in to supporting the aims of the NWAC:

To date, a solid unit has been established dedicated primarily to education, training and delivering of educational resources in the North West of NSW, for example mentor training for local health staff. It is linked with other universities giving it a multi-disciplinary focus and drawing on existing infrastructures in remote health. This has enabled placement numbers to grow, there are longer term placements occurring, ie, social work which is 14 weeks as well as allied health which is generally 7 weeks. The extended time of placement promotes the 'immersion' of the student in

community life which evaluations indicate they find a rich experience. It is not all perfect with the extended placement. Sometimes students 'other' life encroaches. Loneliness, relationship and financial issues can be problematic so students do need to be monitored for this.

With the longer placements, students gain a more 'hands on' practical/clinical experience in a remote setting. They experience the remoteness and how to manage with diminished access to secondary facilities. This highlights to them the need to develop generalist skills within the discipline, and developing skills to work within a multi-disciplinary team. It also emphasises to some, that perhaps a career in remote health is not for them at this time. It is important to be in touch with the students, not 'hand holding' but working with them develop/build resilience skills. It is also important to be present as while the facilities are supportive of students sometimes expectation can vary and these need to be discussed before they become problematic.

The NWAC employs a number of teaching strategies including direct clinical teaching, and 'long arm' supervision. The Director is a registered nurse so can be proactive in the nursing students learning objectives. Other disciplines have supervisors within the organisation they are placed and some of the allied health disciplines have 'long arm' supervision. This has worked well in the health promotion areas. Generally, the NWAC has a small number of teaching staff but draws on the experiences of specialists in the discipline related field. Supervision remains a constant issue for the allied health disciplines as appropriate supervisors are hard to find.

The Centre relies heavily on community members for cultural orientation and general input in to student placements. The towns in the NW area have high populations of Indigenous people so a high standard of cultural orientation is essential.

The need to maintain sustainability of clinical placements is ongoing. A restructure of the Centre in 2017 re-aligned infrastructure (educational, technological and administrative resources), back to BH UDRH. Initial set up issues surrounding information resources remain problematic between the Local Health District and suppliers. Distraction can be an issue, the NWAC manages student accommodation in all the towns so call outs for fuse boxes, broken doors and organising cleaning schedules can be time consuming but it is all part of being a generalist 'hands on' academic!

The way forward looks to be a mix of disciplines, with emphasis on disciplines where there is student supervision readily available...such as nursing, pharmacy, medicine, social work, oral health. The new infrastructure is working well with minimal problems and the NWAC recognises the support given from the BHUDRH in both a collegial and practical sense.

References

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Presenter

Tara Walker is a registered nurse who has made rural/remote health her career choice for the last 20 years. Tara offers skills in remote health service management, education and clinical experience. Tara has managed multi-purpose health facilities in western New South Wales. She did a Masters in Business to provide a structure to her management skills. She was successful in getting funding for clinical projects during her management roles, which assisted the health of the local communities. She was also involved in the evaluation of these projects. Tara has taught nursing at Southern Cross University. She was Director of Primary Health Care with the University of Sydney in Broken Hill, which was responsible for delivering the Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Indigenous Primary Health Care. Her current role is with the University of Sydney, as Director of the North West academic centre, based in Bourke, managing health student placements across five towns. She has authored a book entitled 'Infectious Diseases in Children', published by Ausmed. Tara maintains her clinical skills, she currently works at Bourke Health Service. Tara did her PhD in 1999, which was in child health with a clinical focus.