ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the influence of policy on the provision of, and access to, rural maternity care.

Design: Analysis of policy and case studies.

Setting: Four north Queensland rural towns.

Participants: (a) Rural residents who recently accessed maternity care; and (b) health care professionals involved in the provision of maternity services including midwives, procedural rural medical practitioners and rural GPs.

Main outcome measures: Identification of predominant themes in government policies that relate to rural maternity care and identification of outcomes for local maternity services. These findings were supplemented by insights to rural citizens’ experiences in accessing maternity care and rural clinicians’ experience in providing rural maternity care.

Results: The results indicate a dearth of specific policies to support the development and continuation of rural maternity care services.

Conclusions: Without detailed policy support for rural maternity care, maternity services at each of the four case study towns appeared far more vulnerable to the effects of other non-specific policies and negative environmental factors.

Keywords: north Queensland; maternity care; case studies;

What this paper adds.

What is already known on this subject?
- Policy evaluation can be a difficult and has been a neglected area of activity.
- Many rural health policies aim to improve access to health care services.
- There is concern about the pattern of rural maternity unit closures across Australia.

What does this study add?
- An analysis of the policies and environment around rural maternity care.
- Suggests the importance of detailed policy support for specific rural health care services.
- Highlights the value of multi-methods research, including qualitative methods, in rural health services policy evaluation.