

Health policy: understanding outcomes for rural maternity care.

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Aims and rationale: Despite government commitments to improve rural residents' access to health services, 42% of rural maternity units throughout Queensland have closed over the last 10 years. Such closures raise concerns about equity of access and quality of maternity care for rural communities.

There is little literature available which discusses the impact of health policies on rural residents' experiences of accessing maternity care, or the experiences of the health professionals who provide these services. The aims of this study are twofold: (a) critically review government health policies relevant to rural maternity care; and (b) investigate the correlation between health policy discourse and the lived experiences of rural communities in providing and accessing maternity services.

Approaches: Relevant Commonwealth and Queensland health policies were identified and critically reviewed. A case study approach was then used to explore the lived experiences of both providers (midwives, GP proceduralists, hospital administrators) and users (community members) of maternity care in four rural, north Queensland towns. Data comprised documentary evidence, interviews with service providers and focus groups with community members.

Findings: The reduction of rural maternity services was found to have profound, multifaceted effects on local communities. Lived experiences and policy-related outcomes are discussed within four topic areas: workforce; community engagement; quality and safety of care.

Benefits to the community: Understanding policy outcomes for rural maternity units should inform the development of future health policies. Recommendations are aimed at enhancing maternity care provision and access in rural communities.

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