

Engaging rural communities in health policy

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Aims & Rationale: The Alma-Ata Declaration espouses participation as a right for all citizens and important in the provision of primary health care. Australian health policy discourse encourages citizen engagement, but the extent to which this actually occurs remains unclear. Citizen engagement potentially offers considerable benefits for rural communities – a population with known health disadvantages. Drawing on results of a research project exploring the health policy implications for rural maternity care, this paper aims to (a) discuss the extent of community participation found in four rural north Queensland towns; and (b) consider how policy discourse around citizen engagement may be applied to rural health policies.

Methods: Case studies of four rural north Queensland towns were completed. Observational, interview and documentary data were collected and qualitatively analysed via an inductive thematic technique.

Findings: The case studies provided little indication of formal mechanisms through which community members could provide input to local health service delivery. Two communities demonstrated rapid mobilisation to rally and apply political pressure when their health services were threatened, but a distinction must be made between community action and true engagement processes. While mindful of the benefits, interviewees at all sites were particularly concerned about the barriers to successful community engagement, including: (i) overcoming community scepticism; (ii) concerns about representativeness; and (iii) community capacity.

Benefits to the community: For rural communities, citizen engagement may have particular advantages in enhancing the appropriateness and responsiveness of local health services. Recommendations are made for improving rural communities' input to health policies which affect them.

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