

INFORMING EVIDENCE-BASED HEALTH POLICY FOR RURAL AUSTRALIA



FACULTY OF
HEALTH SCIENCES

Vast travelling distances and workforce shortages pose significant barriers to accessing healthcare services in our rural and remote regions. A partnership between the University of Sydney and the NSW Office of Ageing, Disability and Home Care is looking at new ways the allied health workforce can respond to these challenges.



Led by Professor Craig Veitch, Chair of Community Based Health Care at the University's Faculty of Health Sciences, the project will examine issues facing the delivery of healthcare services in rural and remote NSW, with the aim of developing, implementing and evaluating new sustainable models of care.

"Given the lack of research in this particular area, this project has national significance for the delivery of allied health services throughout Australia, and could well be applicable internationally," says Professor Veitch.

As project partner, the Office of Ageing Disability and Home Care (or ADHC, a division of the Department of Human Services) is seeking evidence to enable future policy to maximise service provision to clients, given the dispersed nature of their workforce.

The project will focus on the delivery of essential physiotherapy, speech pathology, occupational therapy and psychology services by ADHC staff in rural and remote areas.

Beginning with a review of current practices both locally and internationally, researchers will then liaise closely with clinicians working with people with disabilities in the Western Region of NSW.

The project has been named the 'Wobbly Hub and Spokes Model' because services are currently delivered by clinicians based in regional centres, such as Dubbo and Orange, who regularly travel to smaller communities scattered throughout the region to see their clients, who often number well in excess of 500.

"This model is very different to how clinical services are provided in places such as Sydney," says Professor Veitch. "Therefore, the workers have had to modify how they undertake assessments and therapy sessions, based on a visiting service model."

Issues to be explored include the equitable allocation of scarce resources, the intent of current eligibility and prioritisation policies, overcoming workforce constraints and maximising strengths to ensure delivery of the most effective clinical practices.



“Our hope is that the project will result in increased access to allied health services in Western NSW, and a sustainable program of policy monitoring and development long into the future,” says Professor Veitch.

“It is also likely to have an impact on the education of future therapists, as current education is based on an assumption that practice is similar everywhere. We hope to develop a knowledge base to tailor education to the specific needs of future practitioners in rural areas.”

Professor Veitch is joined by a distinguished team of investigators, including speech pathologist Associate Professor Michelle Lincoln, occupational therapist Professor Anita Bundy, health economist Dr Giselle Gallego, Director of the National Centre for Classification in Health Professor Richard Madden and ADHC Western Region Director Scott Griffiths.

Beginning in 2010 and running over four years, the project has attracted funding of \$1.6 million, including

\$800,000 from the National Health and Medical Research Council as one of the first projects funded under its new Partnerships for Better Health scheme.



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