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University Department of Rural Health

Excellence and equity in Rural Health through education, research and engagement

Service Learning in Maryborough

- Where:** Maryborough, Victoria
When: May to September 2017 (continuing in 2018)
Who: Going Rural Health, University of Melbourne, UDRH
How: Service Learning Placements
Discipline: Physiotherapy
Impacts: Significant reduction in waiting list for physiotherapy services; improved access for the community; reduced burden on staff and service; improved patient care.

Maryborough District Health Service (MDHS) had a 3 year waiting list for some physiotherapy services.

MDHS services Central Goldfields and Pyrenees shires in rural Victoria with campuses in Avoca, Dunolly and Maryborough. As is typical for small, rural services, MDHS struggled with workforce retention, high turnover and the resulting shortage of nursing and allied health professionals.

The *Going Rural Health* team worked with staff to develop Service Learning placements for Physiotherapy students. Students were asked to develop and implement a project to reduce the waiting list and provide low-risk interventions to patients.

The first rotation of students worked with their supervisor to develop strategies to reduce the waiting list and identify low risk interventions for elderly patients. Subsequent rotations of students implemented systems to reduce the waiting lists and provide care not previously provided. This reduced workload pressures on physiotherapists and provided increased care for patients at MDHS.

The *Going Rural Health* team supported the service and students throughout the placements, providing experienced and qualified supervisors as well as delivering education and mentoring sessions. The project involved 5 students over 10 weeks. These Service Learning placements provided students with opportunities to develop client engagement skills, work readiness attributes and quality assessment skills whilst contributing towards service delivery in an area of need within the health service.

'Working with the going rural health team has been a great experience. Having them around to help support students has really helped our rural hospital be able to support students, provide a positive learning experience and helped our organization grow and benefit from having the students service learning projects accomplish goals such as reduce wait list times and create patient information brochures. The clients at our service have enjoyed the extra attention and development projects that the students, our organisation and the going rural health team have collaborated on.'

As a clinician I am happy to be helping students learn practical skills in a practical environment; where they can learn independent critical thinking, self-reliance and how to ask for assistance or guidance.' (Physiotherapist, MDHS)

Impacts

The physiotherapy students implemented a project that reduced waiting lists from 3 years to less than 6 months. This gave the local community improved access and provided valued support to the department for this much-needed local service.

These students also developed and implemented appropriate interventions that had pronounced benefit to individual clients. For example:

A physio student worked intensively with an elderly woman in aged care with cognitive impairment who had not walked unaccompanied for 6 years. Through student assessment, she now walks independently (using an aid) from her room to the lounge.

A male client with long history of significant low back pain had been on a waiting list for a long period of time. Students on placement were able to engage with the client and develop a tailored back pain management and strengthening program. From being unable to walk more than 10 metres, he progressed to walking 100 metres and then up to a kilometre.

As MDHS has witnessed the positive impacts of student placements, more staff at MDHS have become open to hosting students. Allied health staff have developed new areas where students can contribute to service delivery whilst they gain valuable clinical, engagement and project skills. There is increased confidence amongst staff in hosting students as they feel supported by the Going Rural Health team.

Similarly, other universities we work with have found service learning placements to be very beneficial learning placements:

"The support from the Going Rural Health team has been fundamental in the growth in number and quality of service learning placements that promote and develop CSU graduate attributes." (Physiotherapy Lecturer, Charles Sturt University)

Feedback on Service Learning Placements

Student feedback on service learning placements has been very positive, with students finding the projects and the opportunity to apply their skills rewarding. They also like the rural setting and working in these small health services:

"The amount of independence given to me on this placement was fantastic. It allowed me to begin transitioning from a student to a graduate." (Physiotherapy student, UoM)

"I felt I was treated as a physio and not a student, felt part of the team, an equal." (Physiotherapy student, UoM)

"Great staff, friendly community, great for self-development. It was incredible! I always considered myself to be a very metropolitan-loving girl, however working in a smaller hospital in a rural setting where the dynamics of staff and patients is very different really opened my eyes and I have even begun considering the option to work rurally once I graduate." (Exercise Physiology student)

The integrated collaboration with health services; providing ongoing education and mentoring to staff, supervisors and students; is having positive impacts and contributing to organisational change:

"It has been very beneficial for the staff and residents having the students with us. The residents that the students have worked with have had an improvement in their lifestyle with us and also their day to day activities. Your program has helped to fill a need that this facility was lacking due to a staff shortage in the allied health fields. The supervisors have done an excellent job with the students keeping them on track with their requirements for this placement as myself and the nursing staff are not qualified to do this for the students. I have also noticed the students enjoy the autonomy that is expected of them in this placement with us. We have enjoyed having the students and their supervisors with us, and hopefully we will continue to be part of this program." (Avoca Aged Care facility)



Moving forward

The Going Rural Health team has continued to work with the health service to further expand their allied health placements and most recently the service hosted an inter-disciplinary placement involving physiotherapy, speech pathology and occupational therapy students supporting the implementation of the Montessori approach in the aged care services.

MDHS remains committed to ensuring the allied health students have a positive experience and this is evident in the opening of a modern education facility and the approved plan to build new student accommodation.

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