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‘This is the published version of the following article: Speare, Tobias. Rural pharmacy: Teaching remote area nurses. Australian Pharmacist, Vol. 33, No. 11, Nov 2014.

which has been published in final form at


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Teaching remote area nurses

BY TOBIAS SPEARE

Australians in rural and remote areas have shorter lives and higher rates of disease and injury than people in urban centres. In addition to having a greater burden of disease, populations in rural and remote areas face increased challenges in accessing appropriate healthcare, including issues related to geography, availability of health professionals, and rural culture.

Workforce issues are a significant barrier to access, with rural and remote health services often struggling to secure resources and recruit and retain staff. The feeling of being an ‘outsider’ that many people from rural areas experience when they visit city hospitals or clinics may make them less willing to seek care in a distant centre. These challenges may be compounded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who may make up a larger proportion of remote populations than in cities.

One of the strategies employed to improve access to healthcare services in remote areas is the recruitment and training of Remote Area Nurses (RANs). The Grattan Institute report, Accessing all areas, identified nurses as the backbone of rural and remote primary care providing a rapidly growing volume of services, especially in relation to chronic disease management. RANs practise at an advanced level often with limited or distant medical support. The extended scope of practice requires RANs to have a broad knowledge base in relation to disease management, including the administration, monitoring, supply and storage of medications.

Pharmacists are recognised as playing an important role in enabling access to healthcare. This role can be extended through education of healthcare staff working in rural and remote areas. As the Pharmacy Academic at the Centre for Remote Health (CRH) in Alice Springs, one of my roles is coordinating and delivering education to RANs. In 2003, recognising the dearth of training for RANs, staff at the CRH and the Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia (CRANAplus) developed a course in the practical use of medicines in disease management – Pharmacotherapeutics for RANs. The program comprises a two-day intensive workshop with associated written assessment, designed to assist RANs in developing knowledge and skills in the use of medications, the risks associated with them, and strategies to increase the benefits and minimise the risks of treatments. The course covers conditions, both chronic and acute, that are common to remote practice and challenges participants to think beyond the usual scope of being a nurse.

Guest presenters, including experienced RANs, specialist medical physicians and specialist pharmacists, provide up-to-date knowledge, expert opinion and practical solutions to challenges that patients and RANs may face in remote settings. The use of case studies assists participants to gain a practical appreciation of concepts and knowledge of medicines and a holistic primary healthcare approach to managing patients. Principles of drug therapy such as adverse reactions, interactions, pharmacology, adherence and professional and legislative issues underpin the cases discussed.

Teaching RANs is an extremely satisfying activity. In addition to meeting a wide range of people with varied backgrounds and experiences, I feel as if I am actually making a difference to the health service provided in remote health clinics.

Earlier this year CRH conducted a survey of RANs who have completed Pharmacotherapeutics for RANs. Respondents stated that the training increased their awareness of drug interactions and side effects of medications, and gave them strategies to enhance adherence. It had also increased their understanding of legal and legislative requirements, prescribing processes, medication review processes, risks of medications, and increased competence in utilising recommended reference material.

The dispersed locations and practice of RANs typifies RAN practice and presents challenges when delivering education. To address this the course is delivered in a variety of locations, including Alice Springs, Darwin, Broome, Mt Isa, Kalgoorlie, Fitzroy Crossing, Umuwa, Warakuna, Longreach and Bamaga. Although the travel to such a large number of remote locations makes delivering the courses more difficult, it is also a rewarding aspect, enabling me to explore some amazing locations.

Working as a pharmacist in rural and remote Australia provides many opportunities for varied and satisfying work. While the rural and remote location creates challenges in access to healthcare, addressing those challenges and having an impact on the way services are delivered is a very fulfilling vocation.

References