

Greater than the sum of its parts: Establishing a clinical services research node to improve health outcomes in rural, regional, and remote New South Wales communities

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Background: Rural, regional and remote (rural) areas are underrepresented in alcohol and other drug (AOD) clinical services' research, and historically receive less funding than urban areas [1,2]. However, people in the country face unique challenges and opportunities that could be built upon by research to address local health priorities [2,3]. Health providers in rural areas are committed to working with their clients and communities to ensure high quality care but they require greater access to research support to build evidence for AOD treatments in these diverse locations [4]. Building on previous and existing initiatives, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre is joining with NSW Health and UNSW's Rural Health Campus to develop a regional Clinical Services Research Node.

Description of Intervention: The regional Research Node brings together consumer, community, clinical and research partners who live and work in rural locations to share resources and expertise, and to collaborate on clinically meaningful evaluations. The Node utilises a co-design approach and draws on the principles of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre's SUSTAIN program to foster collaboration and action between people, institutions and communities [5,6].

Acceptability/Implementation: Seven organisational partners signed a *Joint Statement of Purpose* following the Node's inaugural meeting, and a memorandum of understanding was developed. Since recent inception, the Node has generated an indicative workplan across two local health districts to be developed and implemented over three to five years. One workplan activity already commenced is evaluation of an innovative project designed by a regional AOD service to improve integration across AOD in-reach, outreach and brief intervention programs.

Conclusion and Next Steps: The approach used to develop and implement the Node provides a practical framework for creating infrastructure and support for health services to collaborate and deliver locally relevant evaluations. Rural health services reiterate the need for sustainable partnerships that can create local change, and the Research Node fits this brief. Optimising momentum by actioning workplans and growing partnerships is the current priority.

Implications for Practice or Policy: This practical, collaborative approach could inform clinical practice changes as it increases the evidence-base for AOD service in rural areas. Once tested, the Node could be expanded, or replicated, nationally.

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