

Partnerships and points of difference – opportunities for primary and tertiary health services in Victoria

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Background

Community Health (CH) services are facing growing challenges related to workforce attrition, the shifting burden of disease and increasing expectations to demonstrate efficient and high quality care. Partnership opportunities between primary and tertiary health services are an important strategy to help meet these challenges and improve integration. Merri Community Health Services (MCHS) has successfully implemented a partnership model with Melbourne Health (MH) for the specialist assessment and management of back pain. The results include a new Advanced Practice (AP) physiotherapist role in CH, a community-based assessment clinic for back pain and more timely access for clients.

Methods

Workforce Innovation Grants provided funding for the partnership and formal agreements were developed between the two services to outline operational requirements and knowledge sharing. An assessment clinic was established at MCHS' premises in the primary care setting and is led by MH's AP physiotherapists and Rheumatologist who conduct medical assessment of clients from the hospital's surgical waitlist. Clients are then referred to MCHS' AP physiotherapist for assessment and management. The community health physiotherapist is currently being credentialed to conduct medical assessment of clients on the outpatient surgical waitlists. A comprehensive evaluation framework will assess the impact of the project on clinical outcomes, waitlists and the community health workforce.

Results

MCHS has created new AP roles for staff, facilitating professional development and improved quality of care, and has demonstrated successful decentralization of specialist services and capacity-building within the community. For MH, the project has established clinically appropriate triage processes, and the ability to fast track clients to allied health management, appropriate surgical care or safe discharge.

Discussion

With additional time to evaluate clinical outcomes, monitor waitlists and assess the impact on the community health workforce it is anticipated that this project will demonstrate that innovative partnerships between hospitals and community health improve access, decentralise specialist care away from the acute setting and build workforce capacity within community health.