

A shift in focus from rural workforce to service provision

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Background

Rural health in Australia is typically defined in terms of workforce challenges. These challenges are well documented, however there is limited investigation into broader factors that influence rural service provision or to explain why decisions about the provision of particular services are made. This study examined rural physiotherapy service provision and related decisions making.

Methods

Rural physiotherapy service provision and decision making were explored within a systems theory-case study heuristic. The investigation site was a large area of one Australian state with a mix of regional, rural and remote communities. A prioritised qualitative inquiry enabled key stakeholders to provide their perspectives through surveys and in-depth interviews.

Results

Workforce, higher level decisions, location, sector and funding are some of the factors identified that influenced service provision. Service sector, size and rurality further qualified local service options and influenced service level decision making. Understanding context and diversity was important to understanding local implementation of health system decisions and provided insight into the variation in services provided between sites. The relative invisibility of variation in physiotherapy capacity and service availability observed within the eleven rural communities of this study prompted the development of an index for conceptualising rural physiotherapy availability.

Discussion

Deciding what health services are provided is a key consideration in delivering appropriate and accessible health care for rural populations. Increasing constraints meant that rationing of physiotherapy services, particularly within the public sector, was commonplace. Consequences of service rationing were revealed that are often invisible at a system level yet so pertinent to individuals and communities. Decreased access to public sector physiotherapy services was evident and responses of private physiotherapy providers indicated they were not positioned to address specific service gaps. Shifting the focus from workforce to service provision revealed valuable insights about rural physiotherapy.