

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

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Abstract Title: Rural service-learning paediatric speech pathology clinics make a difference.

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Background:

Children growing up in Australian rural communities are assessed with more communication impairments than their urban counterparts. If left unresolved, communication impairments can lead to long term learning and behavioural problems. Since 2009, supervised speech pathology (SP) students have provided speech, language and communication screening, and therapy services to primary school children in a rural Australian town, in response to limited service availability and socioeconomic disadvantage. This paper describes the design and delivery processes of the Student-Led Clinics and reports the service impact of the program.

Approach:

The design and delivery of the service was derived from program documentation and interviews with the team responsible for the program. Data on service activity and outcomes for 2014 were extracted from an administrative database used to manage and monitor speech pathology services to individual children in seven primary schools.

Outcomes / Results:

Each school term, a new group of six SP students provided services for 5-7 weeks. Children were referred by teachers for screening. Therapy comprised one or more treatment modalities: class-based, small groups, individual sessions outside the classroom and home programs. Active involvement of teachers and parents/caregivers was encouraged. At the end of the 12-month program children were formally discharged. Students were supervised by the SP Academic in close liaison with the school staff to ensure the program fit with smooth running of the school.

In 2014, 101 children commencing primary school had a problem, 58 (57%) mild, 31 (31%) moderate and 12 (12%) severe delay/disorder (46% of the intake). At the end, 24 (26%) children were discharged having reached age appropriate skills; 56 (61%) were given communication goals to address residual problems and 12 (13%) were referred for ongoing care (missing = 9).

All schools reported high levels of satisfaction with the responsiveness of the service model and parental support was very high.

Take Home Message:

SP student-led clinics are an effective model for delivering services to primary school children in communities with limited service availability and high need.