

Acting for positive change: Improving the health of rural communities

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Background

Despite Australia's commitment to improving the health of rural and remote communities, higher rates of chronic disease and mortality continue to be endured compared to people living in major cities. Poor health outcomes and poor health and service literacy co-exist alongside reduced access to health services. Our collaborative research approach with two rural communities in Victoria enabled the transfer of knowledge between university based researchers, the health service, and community stakeholders to develop new strategies to improve community health outcomes.

Objectives

Research objectives focused on capacity building: firstly, to develop health service knowledge of community participation strategies and their relevance to Australian health care policy; and to co-design and co-produce locally responsive health interventions.

Method

A participatory action research methodology underpinned all aspects of the project. Research methods used to develop evidence based interventions included interviews, focus groups, community forums and photo-voice.

Results

Knowledge from community groups, healthcare practitioners, and managers was translated into action for positive change. Governance models were developed for: universities and health services research collaboration; community planning for health and wellbeing; and community led health promotion events and programs, empowering all stakeholders to participate fully. Health service boards, management and staff acquired greater knowledge of community participation strategies and their relevance to Australian health policy.

Conclusions

The increased value of this research was in effectively and sustainably improving knowledge and building capacity for the community, the health service, and researchers. This research provides a sustainable approach for continuing knowledge translation to improve rural health outcomes.