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Inter-professional education: an allied health graduate case study in the Northern Territory

NORTHERN TERRITORY GOVERNMENT

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Background

Entry into the workforce can be challenging and complex for allied health professionals to navigate[1]. The Northern Territory Top End is unique in that a large number of allied health professionals work within integrated multi-disciplinary teams or they hold sole positions within regional locations[2].

Research from within Australia and internationally have demonstrated that providing graduate and early career allied health professionals with a positive transition to professional practice has been shown to be an important determinant of longer term retention and improve inter-professional practice[1, 3].

Objectives

The main objective of the pilot program was to build capabilities required for **effective inter-professional practice (IPP)** and to **support the transition from student to professional** by:

- ✓ Building critical thinking and reflective skills in early career staff
- ✓ Providing knowledge and skills that are not provided at routine health service orientation and discipline specific orientation such as knowledge and skills that can be utilised throughout their careers i.e. self care strategies, conflict resolution skills & inter-professional teamwork; to name a few
- ✓ Providing opportunities to develop inter-professional networks with similar career level professionals
- ✓ Providing opportunities to understand and improve knowledge of other professionals
- ✓ Providing a safe and protected environment to discuss complex issues related to workplace transition

Program Development

The creation of the Top End Health Service (TEHS) **Allied Health Leadership and Clinical Governance Framework** as well as the **TEHS Integrated Health Care Framework** clearly articulated the need for professional development of the workforce and inter-professional care.

The development of an allied health graduate program supported the TEHS Strategic Plan 2017/18-2020/21 Strategic Direction 5: ***"Build a sustainable and quality workforce" by contributing to a quality improvement project for capacity building and workforce development***."

This pilot program was based on the program developed by Northern Health Victoria[1] however session content was modified and contextualised to the Northern Territory and the Top End health service.

Methods

Participants who were in their first two years of work experience were nominated by their managers and attended nine sessions over three months at the Royal Darwin Hospital campus.

Participants and their managers completed online pre-and post-program surveys via SurveyMonkey©. Participants also completed a written feedback form on each session and participated in a focus group activity to evaluate the program upon completion.

Results

- Fourteen graduates and early career staff from the following seven disciplines: Occupational Therapy, Speech Pathology, Pharmacy, Podiatry, Dental Therapy, Prosthetics and Orthotics and Physiotherapy; enrolled into the pilot program.
- Data from the online surveys were analysed by Survey Monkey© using descriptive statistics and qualitative data i.e. responses to session feedback forms and the focus group were categorised into main themes and ideas.

Inter-professional learning:

The interaction, networking and sharing of experiences within the cohort was described by all participants and managers as meeting the definition of **IPL**. All learning activities in the program were deemed **intentional**, **meaningful** and **useful** as well as fostered open communication and group cohesion.

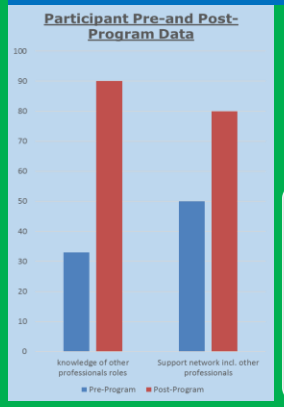
Program content and speaker evaluation

All topics were considered relevant and appropriate at this career level. Topics participants found particularly valuable included transition shock, self-care strategies as well as rural and remote practice. Suggestions for additional topics included resilience, unconscious bias and a practical cultural session. The range of guest presenters from the within the health service and external organisations were well received and engaging.

Program logistics evaluation

Hospital based staff tended to prefer afternoons due to multi disciplinary team meetings and ward rounds. Wednesday was a preferred day with all participants. The addition of three extra topics has lengthened the program to a 4 month duration.

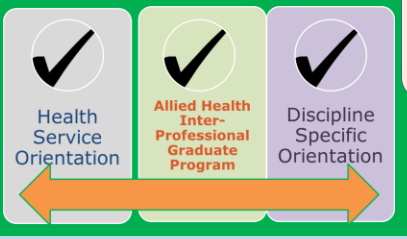
Results



"Great that NT now has a graduate program - it should be highlighted in recruitment as for me it would have made the NT more attractive to me when seeking graduate work. " -Participant

"It did meet the definition of IPL and it was good to ascertain an understanding of how other professions work." - Participant

"Program appears to be helpful in building new grad community/support network. Acknowledge that others going through learning process at same time just in different contexts. Have seen the professional confidence of new grad therapist attending program increase in the workplace in recent weeks which has been great." - Manager



Moving forward, the pilot program will be modified in terms of logistics and topics given the feedback from participants and managers. This pilot inter-professional allied health graduate program was the first of its kind for the Northern Territory Top End Health Service. It provided professional development to early career staff that is complementary to the health service and discipline specific induction and orientations.

Conclusions

The 2017 pilot inter-professional allied health graduate program was deemed a success due to a number of reasons:

- Graduates reported an improved sense of support, confidence and focus moving forward into their subsequent year of professional practice
- Specific learnings reported included increased reflective practice, cross discipline patient care and altered attitudes regarding inter-professional collaboration and practice
- Managers reported improved inter-professional practice and collaboration of their staff with other health professionals as well as an increase in graduate confidence levels

Results from the pilot program contributed to the expansion and refinement of an ongoing sustainable andragogy for the professional development of the early career workforce.

In conclusion, supporting the early career allied health workforce has been shown to be important factor in facilitating inter-professional practice from an early stage and this may influence collaborative practice and workforce retention rates for the Top End.

References:

1 Smith, R.A & Pilling, S (2007). Allied health graduate program – supporting the transition from student to professional in an interdisciplinary program. Journal of Interprofessional Care. 21 (3): 265-276.

2 NT Department of Health. (2017). NT Health Annual Report 2016-17. Retrieved from http://digitallibrary.health.nt.gov.au/prodjspui/bitstream/10137/1417/4/Annual%20Report%202016-17.pdf

3 Fertman, C; Dotson, S; Mazzocco, G & Reitz, S (2005). Challenges for preparing allied health professionals for interdisciplinary practice in rural areas. Journal of Allied Health. 34(3): 163-168.

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