

Abstract

A networked approach to addressing COVID-19 in rural and remote Australia

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Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 global pandemic has been a significant challenge worldwide. This has been particularly so in rural and remote communities where largely metropolitan-based policies do not translate into the rural context. Western NSW Local Health District (Australia), a region spanning almost 250,000 km² (slightly larger than the UK), has implemented a networked approach that spanned public health measures, acute care services and psycho-social supports for rural communities.

Method: A synthesis of field observations and experiences in planning and implementing a networked rural approach to COVID-19.

Results: This presentation reports on the key enablers, challenges and observations in operationalising a networked, rural-specific, 'whole-of-health' approach to COVID-19. As of 22 December 2021, the region (total population 278,000) had confirmed over 112,000 cases of COVID-19 across some of the state's most disadvantage

rural communities. This presentation will provide an overview of the framework used to address COVID-19, including descriptions of the public health response, specific care needs of those with COVID-19, cultural and social support for vulnerable peoples and an approach to keeping the community well.

Discussion: Responses to COVID-19 need to be 'rural proofed' to ensure that the need of rural communities can be met. Acute health services must leverage a networked approach that supports existing clinical workforce through effective communication and developing rural-specific processes to ensure best practice care can be delivered. This includes utilising advances in telehealth to ensure people can access clinical support when diagnosed with COVID-19. Managing the COVID-19 pandemic across rural communities requires 'whole-of-system' thinking and strengthening partnerships to manage both public health measures as well as an acute care response.

