

Keeping health professionals in remote communities

12 February 2020

A research team has defined what it will take to keep health professionals in remote communities in a recent paper published in BMC's Human Resources for Health.

Researchers from six Australian universities, working with the Northern Territory Department of Health, have conducted a multi-year study of remote staff turnover in the Northern Territory.

The paper brings together findings from multiple publications to outline how to decrease the turnover of health professionals in remote communities.

Professor John Wakerman, the study's chief investigator, says several steps need to be taken to keep health professionals working in remote communities.

"There is no silver bullet. It's a complex issue requiring a bundle of strategies. Based on our analysis of NT data and drawing on international evidence we describe three broad approaches for successfully retaining remote area health staff," Prof Wakerman said.

"Firstly, universities need to target enrolment into health training and deliver appropriate, contextualised education. Second, health services need to address underlying system issues, such as adequate funding, to ensure a safe and supportive work environment. Finally, services need to offer customised individual and family support packages."

The paper documents four key health service policies to enhance workforce retention:

1. Strong intersectoral collaboration between the health and education sectors to ensure a fit-for-purpose workforce
2. A funding policy which mandates the development and implementation of an equitable, needs-based formula for funding remote health services
3. Policies that facilitate transition to community control of services, prioritise Indigenous training and employment and mandate a culturally safe work context
4. An employment policy which provides flexibility of employment conditions in order to be able to offer individually customised retention packages

"Some of these policies are in place, for example, prioritising Indigenous employment is an existing Northern Territory Government policy," Prof Wakerman said.

"The Department of Health has taken these findings on board. They have been working on a training and employment pathway for nurses and are developing strategies to decrease the number of short-term agency nurses they use."

"There's sufficient evidence, both local and international, that tells us how to strengthen our primary health care services in the most remote communities," Prof Wakerman said.

"Whilst achieving some of these measures, such as a national needs-based funding of primary care, may be difficult, we can confidently say that improving these first-contact

services will take the pressure off hospital admissions, decrease costs overall and improve health outcomes.”

The *Remote health workforce turnover and retention: what are the policy and practice priorities?* paper can be [read here](#).

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