

NACCHO GP Network

Enhancing communication in Aboriginal health

BACKGROUND Communication between general practitioners, information sharing, and GP support are important issues, especially for those in rural and remote areas. Internet based links can facilitate enhanced communication.

OBJECTIVE This article describes the new internet based communication forum for GPs working, or interested in the health of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

DISCUSSION The NACCHO GP Network is the first on-line service to provide focussed information for GPs in the Aboriginal community controlled health sector. It also provides a place for GPs, locums and general practice registrars to raise issues and share ideas and information on Aboriginal health practice. The NACCHO GP Network has the potential to reduce isolation and address the support needs of GPs, and enhance the interaction of the Aboriginal community controlled sector with general practice organisations.

Aboriginal community controlled health services (ACCHS) across Australia can now provide useful information and an on-line service for general practitioners, locums and general practice registrars on Aboriginal health practice. The NACCHO GP Network (NGPN) was developed by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), with the support of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, through Australian government Department of Health and Ageing funding. An Aboriginal community controlled construct for GPs across Australia to regularly communicate on Aboriginal health matters has never existed before. The establishment of the NGPN has the potential to address the support needs of individual GPs, as well as significantly enhance the interaction of the Aboriginal community controlled sector with general practice organisations. The NGPN can be used to provide advice to NACCHO on a wide range of issues affecting GPs.

What does the NGPN do?

The NGPN is an internet based facility accessible via www.naccho.org.au or directly at www.naccho.org.au/gphome.html and provides:

- links to ACCHSs
- information on GP and registrar vacancies
- links to other websites with complementary content, and
- schedules of broadcasts by the Rural Health Education Foundation (RHEF).

The website also has a free 'members only' area for GPs, locums, and general practice registrars either practising in Aboriginal communities or with an interest



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in Aboriginal health, which holds a number of on-line forums. Members can also contact colleagues within private email groups. Forums and news items over the past quarter have included:

- Information on the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item 710 and cultural safety programs
- Employment opportunities in ACCHSs
- GP training (for Australian and overseas registrars)
- Workforce data, and
- Relevant new technologies in communications.

Medicare Benefits Schedule

The NGPN encouraged discussions on the MBS item 710 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adult health check). General practitioners were referred to an information kit containing details and a checklist for completing the service.

The Mulungu Aboriginal Corporation Medical Centre in Mareeba, Queensland, prepared a template for completing an adult health check which appears more convenient and time saving. The form, a template for Medical Director, has been submitted to the NGPN and is available for registered users.

Cultural safety programs

The NGPN was used to invite GPs to participate in cultural safety programs. From April to July 2005, a series of seven workshops were hosted across Australia for GPs and other primary health care doctors working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The workshops delivered a cultural safety training program specifically developed for busy GPs by the Western Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (WAACCHO). For more information go to: www.ahcwa.org/documents/CST_April_2005.htm.

GP vacancies

Of the eight GP vacancies listed on the NGPN site over the past 6 months, four have been filled. Anecdotal feedback from these ACCHSs indicate that the advertisements placed on the NGPN significantly contributed to the interest received from GPs. Services with vacancies for GPs, locums or registrars can inform the NGPN for free posting of information.

Registrar training

The NGPN is working with the General Practitioner Education and Training (GPET) and the RACGP to promote employment and career opportunities for registrars within the ACCHS sector. Locations of

services with general practice registrar supervisors have been added to the locum providers component of the website. The NGPN is assisting the New South Wales NACCHO affiliate (Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council) in a GPET project to help ACCHSs qualify as Aboriginal Health Training Posts in order to access commonwealth funded registrar positions.

Efforts are also underway to promote the NGPN to both national and international universities with medical teaching programs to encourage overseas trained doctors to apply for Australian positions within ACCHSs.

Workforce data

The NGPN is being used to develop ways in which workforce data from ACCHSs may be collected to assist in planning for staff recruitment and training. The linkages between workforce and service delivery are necessary so that the demand for GPs is better quantified, and that training bodies have an indication of market demand.

New technologies in communication

The NGPN has been actively providing information to ACCHSs and GPs on the government's Broadband for Health Program. This program provides funds for all ACCHSs to have access to broadband internet services to enhance communication in the delivery of patient health care. Trials using the broadband internet are underway in a number of locations across the country. Debate about the appropriateness of these trials and electronic health records in general, are continuing within communities, the professions and in the press.

The future for NGPN

The NGPN is evolving with the direction being determined by its increasing membership, now standing at 381, and participation rates of its members. Goals of the NGPN include saving GPs time, and contributing to professional development and sharing of information around the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within a community controlled context.

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