

Online professional development and support in rural and remote disability services

An online platform to provide disability workers in rural and remote locations with opportunities for professional support and skill development may help to improve staff retention rates in regional areas. This could improve access to disability services for children on the autism spectrum living in these communities.

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Overcoming isolation for disability service providers in rural and remote Australia

Families of children on the autism spectrum who live in rural and remote communities in Australia often have limited access to disability support services.¹ Commonly cited barriers to adequate services for these families include long waiting lists, extensive travel times and lack of choice for specialist disability services.¹ In many cases, these issues stem from staff recruitment and retention issues in the remote area health sector.^{2,3} With the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), demand for disability services for children on the autism spectrum is anticipated to increase. The majority of individuals entering the scheme to date have been children aged up to 14 years with developmental disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum.⁴ However, there are concerns regarding the capacity for services in regional Australia to cope with this demand. Contributing to this concern are the significant disincentives faced by professional disability workers working in these communities, including a demanding clinical workload, a sense of professional isolation and a lack of professional development opportunities.⁵

To overcome such difficulties, policy and program advisors have called for innovative models of delivering services and support for disability workers in rural and remote communities that include mentoring for staff, and support to establish and maintain professional networks.⁶ One proposed approach has been to harness technology to provide a low-cost and widely-accessible platform to deliver this professional training and support, similar to the videoconferencing already in use for delivering telehealth to individuals in rural and remote communities.

Is telehealth a viable solution?

Telehealth is a well-established mode for delivering distance health services. Telecommunications technology can provide access to professional services and support for any individual irrespective of their

location. It may involve the individual taking part in live video streaming for real time communication with a healthcare provider, or interacting with online multimedia platforms to learn new information.

Telehealth has been used successfully in the disability sector for medical rehabilitation^{7,8,9}, direct intervention^{10,11,12}, employment support¹³ and support groups.¹⁴ To date, however, there has been limited evidence on the effectiveness of using online technology to deliver disability-specific education and support programs to service providers in remote regions, and little understanding of what is the most effective mode of delivery for online learning and support for disability support networks.

Developing a solution: the Building Connections project

Since September 2015, the *Aspect Building Connections* project, together with funding from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services, has developed and trialled an online platform to deliver interactive group webinars and individualised online support sessions to a range of disability workers who are providing services to children on the autism spectrum in regional, rural and remote communities across New South Wales. The aim of the project was to provide these workers with opportunities for professional support and skill development via an online platform.

To design the *Building Connections* service, the project team first conducted a preliminary needs analysis in early 2015. The key areas of need identified for the professional disability workers in rural and remote communities the frequency of support and the acceptability of using technology to delivery this support.¹⁵

Based on the findings of the needs analysis, the *Building Connections* project delivered online interactive webinars across a 12-month period, webinars focussed on a broad range of topics including social skills, sensory processing and challenging behaviour.

Participants were free to ask questions at any time throughout the webinar and were encouraged to engage in discussion around the webinar topic with the presenter and other participants. During individual support sessions, participants were able to set an agenda or engage in free discussion regarding previous workshop content, their current caseload, or questions they may have around other topics.

The *Building Connections* service was open to allied health professionals and assistants, community and disability support workers, aboriginal health workers, early childhood educators, and any other professional who had worked with, or was currently working with children on the autism spectrum or with developmental delay aged from birth to eight years. In the 25 months to October 2017, over 150 workers across 22 Local Government Areas (LGA) registered in the project.

The first round of webinars and support began in September 2015 and focussed on participants in Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Lightning Ridge. In September 2016, the second round of webinars and support was rolled out to the Central West and Orana regions of NSW.

Evaluating the project

To assess the success of the project, online surveys were used to measure any changes in the perceived skills, knowledge and confidence of participants in their work with children and their families. The evaluation also measured the participants' levels of occupational stress (using the Occupational Stress Inventory-Revised¹⁶) and the accessibility and acceptability of the technology platform. A total of 102 participants took part in the evaluation, in two groups: Group 1 consisted of participants from 2015 to 2016 who took part in webinars and individualised support sessions; and Group 2 was formed from project participants in 2016 to 2017 who took part in webinars only.

Findings

Preliminary findings from the Group 1 evaluation were positive, providing support for the feasibility of an interactive, technology-based platform to deliver training and support for disability workers in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia, and indicating that such a platform can provide significant benefits for these workers that will aid in their retention in their communities.

Participants from Group 1 reported a significant increase in knowledge, skills, and confidence in their work with children on the autism spectrum and their families after taking part in the project, with no significant change in occupational stress. Overall, the technology platform was rated by Group 1 participants as 'above average' for technology usability and audio quality. Group 1 participants who engaged in individualised support sessions commented that as a

result of the sessions, they were able to gain valuable information that was additional to that provided by the webinars, were able to develop individual plans and were satisfied with the frequency of the sessions.

Next steps

On the basis of these positive results for the individualised support sessions, the research team have secured NDS Innovative Workforce Funding to pilot a collaborative, autism-specific support service to be delivered to rural and remote clients and their support teams via videoconferencing technology (tele-therapy). Using the feedback gained from the evaluation of the project, including Group 2 data from late 2017, the *Building Connections* program will be redeveloped for rollout in January 2018 for an additional 12 months, and will continue to provide accreditation for teachers. It is expected that following NDS evaluation in July 2018, the *Building Connections* tele-therapy (videoconferencing) service will be rolled out under NDIS funding. This service will also have potential to be replicated across all Aspect client services.

In addition, a doctoral research study is currently being conducted on the *Building Connections* program by Aspect staff member Genevieve Johnsson, though the University of Sydney. The research is investigating whether the additional individualised support provided produced better outcomes in terms of confidence, and knowledge and skills in working with children on the autism spectrum than group webinar training alone. This study is also investigating whether there was any change in role overload, job satisfaction or job stress from pre- to post-program.

After taking part in the *Building Connections* trial, disability workers in rural and remote locations reported a significant increase in knowledge, skills, and confidence in their work with children on the autism spectrum and their families.

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