

Models of nursing and allied health student placements in times of COVID-19

Nursing students on rural clinical placement undertaking clinical simulation training at the Charleville Hospital.



Rural and remote nursing and allied health student placements

Part of the strategy to expand the rural and remote health workforce has been the funding of University Departments of Rural Health (UDRHs) to support training of nursing and allied health students. In this role, UDRHs have provided a range of placements for nursing and allied health students in rural and remote settings. Given the workforce shortages in rural and remote areas, providing these placements is not straightforward, as services and staff often lack the resources to fully support students' practical learning needs.

UDRHs have boosted the work of these services with resources, education, student supervision

and innovative models of placements. For over a decade, UDRHs have developed work-integrated learning, service learning and telehealth models of student placements to provide different types of placements that rely less on the existing workforce. These placements provide learning opportunities for students as well as services for rural and remote residents (ARHEN 2020).

Rural and remote nursing and allied health student placements during COVID-19

During COVID-19, these diverse types of placements have the potential to enable students to undertake placements, enhance the workforce and expand health services in innovative ways. >



Currently, UDRHs have reconfigured placements to be responsive to the public health crisis. For example, allied health students are providing telerehabilitation, online exercise programs, physiotherapy and other interventions to the elderly, people with disability and primary aged children as they isolate in their rural homes.

Learning from rural and remote placements

These work-integrated learning, service learning and telehealth models of placements have the potential to provide placement opportunities in non-rural and remote settings to address the need for students to continue their learning.

There is much that can be learnt from UDRHs about creatively designing placements to meet student, health service and community needs. For example, in these diverse types of placements, nursing and allied health students undertake assessments, reviews, provide routine care or implement a range of services and interventions. These placements may be based in a health service, such as a hospital, community health service, aged care centre or other primary care setting, or in non-health settings, including primary and secondary schools, kindergartens, local government, disability services, human services, not-for-profit organisations or community settings.

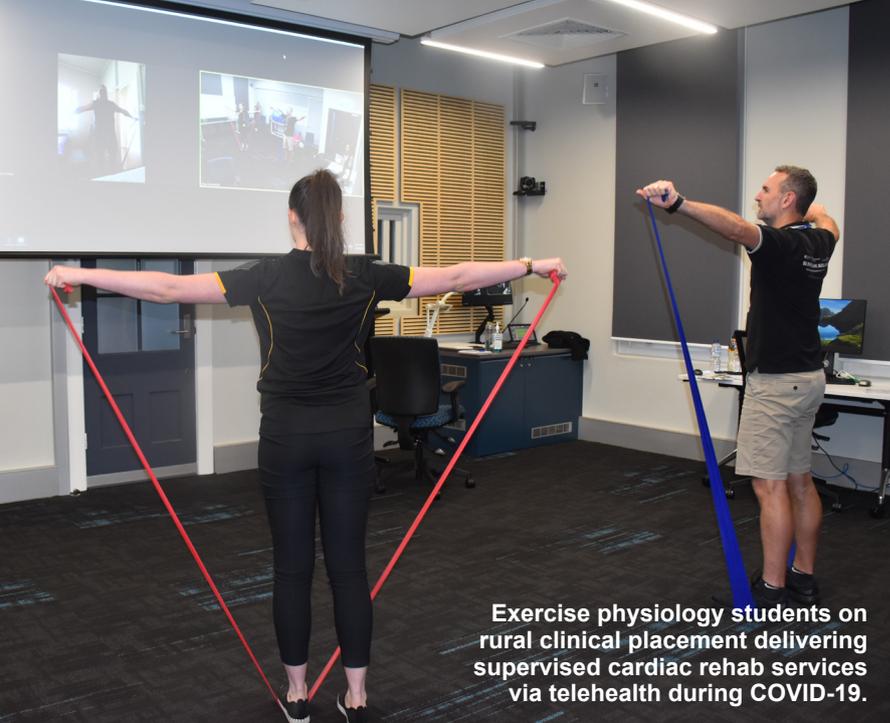
Some students undertake project work for health services or communities that provide evidence, resources and program planning. The use of long-arm, local, virtual or multi-modalities of supervision also makes these placements different.

These placements have been identified as useful where workforce is lacking, where health and community services are limited, and where health consumers have specific or high health care needs (Jones, 2015a). Students are clear that these work-integrated learning, service learning and telehealth models of placements are challenging, due to the autonomy, self-direction and independence required. Despite the challenges, students report that these placements are very satisfying, both personally and professionally, as a result of applying their skills.

These placements have been found to develop work-readiness, critical thinking, and collaborative, organisational and interprofessional skills (Jones 2015a, 2015b). They have also enabled final year students to progress to graduation.

Conclusion

Key concerns during the pandemic are ability of the current health workforce to maintain essential services, meet health needs created by the pandemic, and maintain safety, health and wellbeing. Currently, there are opportunities for



Exercise physiology students on rural clinical placement delivering supervised cardiac rehab services via telehealth during COVID-19.

new ways of learning in unpredictable and rapidly changing environments.

Placements at this time prepare students for future health care challenges, teach broader public health responses and provide experience in responding to dynamic health needs. Continuing clinical placements also facilitate health student progress to graduation, so they enter the workforce on time.

In summary, given the changes to health care in recent months and the demand for student placements in the coming months, learning from alternative types of placements can be important. UDRHs can assist in providing these alternatives. ^{ha}

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