

The experience of Primary Health Networks during the 2021 COVID-19 outbreak – challenges and learnings

DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PRACTICE

School of Medicine

Western Sydney University

Project commenced 4 December 2021

PROJECT PLAN

Background

Following a discussion between Professor Reath and senior management of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, we received a request for a research proposal addressing the need to understand and document the experience and role of NSW primary health networks (PHNs) in this current COVID-19 outbreak. The outbreak resulted in the lockdown of greater Sydney from 26th May 2021 and slowly extended to rural and regional NSW. This lockdown is currently ongoing.

The ten NSW PHNs are: Central and Eastern Sydney PHN, Hunter New England and Central Coast PHN, Murrumbidgee PHN, Nepean Blue Mountains PHN, North Coast PHN, Northern Sydney PHN, South Eastern NSW PHN, South Western Sydney PHN, WentWest (Western Sydney PHN) and Western NSW PHN.

Our objectives in undertaking this research will be to:

- describe the expectations and roles of NSW PHNs including expectations of primary health care (PHC) during this pandemic outbreak;
- document barriers and facilitators for PHNs and PHC providers in meeting the expectations;
- recommend improved processes for working with PHNs and PHC providers in for future emergency responses.

Methods

We will strengthen our research findings by triangulating different data sources and research approaches as detailed below:

1. review and summarise available documents related to PHN experiences, initiatives, communications and support related to this COVID-19 outbreak;
2. #conduct an online survey with PHC providers from the jurisdictions of the ten NSW PHNs to explore their experiences of PHN support during the outbreak;
3. conduct in-depth semi-structured informant interviews with relevant staff at each of the ten PHNs in NSW to explore their experiences during the outbreak (max 20 interviews of approximately 30 minutes each);
4. conduct a focus group with PHN management (tagged onto the end of one of the NSW PHN CEO meetings) to reflect on our analysis of the above data sources.

A scoping literature review will be conducted at the start of the study. Ethics approval will be obtained from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. We anticipate that the application of this minimal risk research will be expedited due to its urgency. All data collected will be analysed qualitatively using content and thematic analysis approaches.

Our findings including recommendations to guide engagement with PHNs and PHC in future health emergencies will be provided in a written report to the PHNs and a paper will be submitted for peer-review publication. We anticipate that the work will be completed in four months between September 2021 and January 2022. The timeline nonetheless will be contingent on finalisation of a contract with the PHNs and clearance from the Dean of the WSU School of Medicine.

A note on the surveys: In order not to over-burden already stressed PHC providers during the current COVID-19 outbreak, we propose a 5-10 minute online survey with Likert scales (plus 1-2 comment boxes) for each PHNs to forward to their practices and invite GPs, practices nurses and practice managers to participate. We also propose an incentive to facilitate recruitment: completed surveys will go into a lucky draw of one \$100 shopping voucher per PHN area.

Timeline

Stage	Timeframe
Scoping literature review	Month 1
Development of interview and focus group guides	Month 1
Ethics application	Month 1
Review of available documents	Month 1-3
Informant interviews with max 20 PHN staff	Month 2
Conduct online survey with PHC providers	Month 2-3
Focus group with PHN management	Month 4
Data analysis	Month 1-5
Final report (in 1:3:25 format) to NBMPHN	Month 5
Manuscript submission to peer-review journal	Within 3 months of project completion

EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE OF THE WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL PRACTICE

Western Sydney University has a strong commitment to the translation of research into outcomes of benefit to the Australian community. The Department of General Practice sits within the School of Medicine and is strongly engaged in all facets of the primary, secondary and tertiary health care systems, particularly with general practice in both teaching and research. Not only does the Department has a particularly strong presence within the western and south-western regions of Sydney, it has strong relationships with PHNs across Australia.

The Department is well-known for its focused and innovative approach and partnership activities that have resulted in sustainable change. It has an extensive track record in managing complex projects with networks of collaborators and for delivering projects on time and within budget. Specific examples of relevant projects include

- *Watch and Inflate*: a clinical trial network running trials in six Aboriginal health services to examine aspects of the management of otitis media in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- *QUEST-PHC*: a collaboration with 10 PHNs to develop and test a tool to measure across all components of high-quality general practice in Australia.
- An early phase evaluation of the Partners in Recovery program led by the Nepean Blue Mountains Medicare Local using program logic and thematic analysis.
- Evaluation of the overall experiences and perspectives of Western Sydney Integrated Care Program (WSICP) implementation and integrated care.
- Evaluation of Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN) Cancer Screening Program.

THE TEAM

The team consists of senior and mid-career researchers in the Department of General Practice, Western Sydney University. Collectively we have in excess of 70 years' experience in health services research in vulnerable populations including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. In particular, we have extensive experience working with PHNs.

Doctor Phyllis Lau PhD, GradDip Drug Eval Pharm Sci, B Pharm is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of General Practice, Western Sydney University. She is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of General Practice, The University of Melbourne and an honorary Associate Professor at The Melbourne Dental School. Phyllis has extensive experience in Indigenous health research, communication, interprofessional collaboration, chronic disease management and service delivery research, particularly related to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and disadvantaged population groups. She currently co-leads the Quality Equity and Systems Transformation in Primary Health Care (QUEST PHC) project in collaboration with 8 PHNs across 4 states in Australia.

She has been awarded several research grants over the years including National health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants and fellowship grants and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) awards. She is or has been a Chief Investigator in 15 funded projects and the primary investigator in 9. She has 68 publications with another 4 under review and 4 in draft.

Phyllis' expertise is in mixed-methods research. She has experience in various study designs including randomised controlled trials, descriptive quantitative studies, qualitative studies (predominantly phenomenological design), interviews, focus groups, quantitative/qualitative/mixed-methods surveys including Delphi consensus surveys for management pathway development and case studies.

Phyllis will lead this project including the study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and will articulate a set of recommendations to inform future emergency response from the PHNs to COVID-19 and other acute respiratory infectious diseases in NSW. She will oversee the writing and be responsible for the final report of this work.

Professor Jennifer Reath MBBS PhD MMed FRACGP Dip RANZCOG GAICD has been the *Peter Brennan* Foundation Chair of General Practice at Western Sydney University since 2010. She has over 30 years of experience as a general practitioner working mostly in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services. Currently she works a day a week at Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation. Jenny is a Fellow of the RACGP, has recently completed her PhD on Training and Support of General Practitioners in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health. She also has a Master of Medicine by research. Over the past 25 years, Jenny has established a national profile in program, guideline and policy development, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. She currently leads two NHMRC funded multicentre clinical trials in Aboriginal ear disease and since 2012 has led evaluations of innovative models of health care in western Sydney. Jenny is a member of the RACGP National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Faculty Council (previously Deputy Chair), a Director of South Western Sydney PHN, member of Nepean Blue Mountains PHN Integrated Care Clinical Council and South Western Sydney Integrated Care Collaboration.

Professor Reath will assist with research planning, data analysis and interpretation, and report writing.

Associate Professor Penelope Abbott PhD MBBS Hons MPH CF GAICD FRACGP is an Associate Professor in the Department of General Practice. She has been a practicing general practitioner in western Sydney for over 20 years and is highly involved in the Westerns Sydney PHN, where she is currently Chair of the Clinical Council and a member of the GP Leaders group. She is on the GP Advisory Group for the Agency for Clinical Innovation and has undertaken multiple committee, board and advisory group positions for governmental and non-governmental projects and organisations. She has demonstrated expertise and experience in health services research and a strong understanding of the topic area of primary care, PHNs and the COVID-19 response.

Assoc Prof Abbott will assist with research planning, data analysis and interpretation, and report writing.

Doctor Steven Trankle PhD, BA (Honours) Psychology is an Associate Research Fellow at the Department of General Practice, Western Sydney University. He has extensive experience in qualitative and quantitative methodologies and has been working in health services research with PHNs since 2013. Steve has managed a comprehensive evaluation based on a program logic model and mixed methods for the Nepean Blue Mountains PHN (NBMPHN) and its Partners in Recovery Program in 2014. In 2015, he conducted a comprehensive qualitative evaluation of the Western Sydney Integrated Care Program (funded by Western Sydney Local health District and a PHN), and in 2017 conducted a qualitative evaluation of quality improvements in general practice to raise cancer screening rates in NBMPHN. Steve is currently leading a mixed methods evaluation for NBMPHN of an afterhours telehealth service in residential aged care facility, and is managing a mixed method evaluation of an integrated care program in South Western Sydney PHN and the local health district (My Care Partners).

Dr Trankle will assist with ethics applications, literature review, data collection and analysis, and report writing.

Doctor Winston Lo BMed BCom (Merit) GCULT MMH(GP) FRACGP is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of General Practice. He has been a practicing general practitioner working across central, western and south western Sydney for 17 years. Winston is involved with the Central and Eastern Sydney PHN, for whom he is the current GP representative on the SLHD Health Care Clinical Quality Council, the SLHD Clinical Council and the CESPHN Alcohol & Other Drugs Advisory Committee. Having worked as a researcher for 4 medical schools and the RACGP NSW/ACT Faculty, he has attained experience in health services research. Winston has a unique insight into primary care, the work of PHNs and the COVID-19 response – he has worked at a COVID test clinic (funded via a PHN), Royal Prince Alfred (RPA) COVID Vaccination Hub and RPA Virtual which delivers health care to hotel quarantine residents.

Dr Lo will assist with data analysis and interpretation, and report writing.