

## 'Victorian Nurses Health Program expands service to regional and rural settings'

Since August 2006, the Victorian Nurses Health Program (VNHP) has been providing a professional discreet program for nurses, midwives and students of nursing and midwifery who have developed health issues relating to their drug & alcohol use and or mental health concerns. The program is funded by the Nurses Board of Victoria (NBV) through registration and operates as an independent entity overseen by a Board of Directors. It offers information, referral services, individual sessions, support groups, screening for mental health issues and case management for those with substance use concerns.

The Nurses Board of Victoria has generously provided the VNHP with additional funds to assist the health needs of this group presenting with these concerns who identify as living in rural and regional locations throughout Victoria.

It is commonly understood that people located in rural and regional areas will at times struggle to obtain suitable health services in a timely manner and that isolation can perpetuate the feeling of disconnection that this target group often experience.

For nurses, midwives and students experiencing substance use issues and mental health concerns this can be all the more challenging given the sensitive nature of the problem and the need for anonymity and confidentiality in regards to the help that they require.

To date the VNHP has provided a timely response to this group prioritising time where possible for initial assessments. Under the present service model they are required to attend our Fitzroy (Melbourne) office to undertake this assessment and to return for subsequent support appointments.

Many of our participants have expressed concerns regards the logistics associated with attending these appointments. These include such examples as; arranging time off work; disruption to family commitments such as childcare arrangements; organising transport; and participant's inability to stay overnight in Melbourne if required.

This ultimately places these nurses at greater disadvantage and potentially at further risk of not seeking the necessary support due to the reasons stated above.

The NBV Professional Conduct Unit has identified an increase in the number of episodes of depression and anxiety presenting to them from rural and regional areas.

These nurses may be the primary breadwinner in the family and their health is often compromised due to the need for them to either; work at less than optimum capacity; return to work after a period of sick leave at a less than optimum capacity or increase their hours of work in order to support the family income. This has been linked to the pressures related to the farming industry, self-employment and remote community living where life is often very challenging.

Since the VNHP commenced service provision to Victorian nurses, midwives and students in August 2006 approximately 23% of participants have identified as living in rural or regional areas of the state.

This figure has grown the longer the service has been in operation. Feedback from directors of nursing; hospital managers, human resource departments and the nurses themselves suggests the take up of the service supports provided by the VNHP would be even greater if the service was provided in their own environments or in locations more accessible to them.

Feedback indicates that often there is a reluctance to travel to Melbourne or indeed to venture far from the environment they are familiar with.

The additional funds have been directed toward resourcing a part-time VNHP Case Manager and supporting the delivery of the service.

Service will commence from early October 2009 in Ballarat, Shepparton and Traralgon. Discrete office space has been secured in these areas, consultation with local key stakeholders has commenced and systems and processes are being developed to support the service.

Supporting our colleagues with these sensitive health issues can be a challenge and we have been privileged to witness many successful outcomes over time via engagement with our service.

We look forward to providing a service which will assist those living in rural and regional areas of Victoria.

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