Case Study: Medical College Digital Health Education and Support.

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CONTEXT

The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) has a special vision for 'the right doctors, with the right skills in the right places providing excellent healthcare to rural people'[1]. It progresses this by providing training and professional development, education programs and resources; setting and upholding professional standards; and, through provision of support and advocacy for rural doctors and students aspiring to rural careers.

ACRRM is one of Australia's two Australian Medical Council (AMC) accredited medical colleges providing training towards Fellowship in the specialty of general practice. The ACRRM programs are designed to prepare Fellows for the rural generalist model of practice. This incorporates a broad practice scope and special skills to deliver highest quality care in rural, remote, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

ACRRM has been delivering nationally accredited Fellowship programs for over a decade and represents some 5500 rural doctor and medical student members across the country.

ACRRM is the only medical college in the world dedicated to rural and remote medicine. The College currently has a suite of over 100 online, in-person, and blended courses that are mapped to the ACRRM Rural Generalist Curriculum and are developed and delivered by College Fellows. The College has worked in the online education space for over 20 years.

PURPOSE

The College's Digital Health Committee oversees the development and promulgation of ACRRM policy, positions, standards, models, and education to facilitate beneficial use of digital health in rural generalist practice. This includes

- Digital health enabled models of care which contribute to high quality and safe outcomes for people in rural and remote Australia
- Professional standards and educational requirements governing implementation and quality use of digital health in rural generalist practice
- Review of the College Curriculum which includes the learning area of digital health.[2]

Digital Health has been included and defined as part of the ACRRM Fellowship skill set since the publishing of the foundation curriculum in 1998. To support both the training and professional development needs of College Members, the College has been building a suite of education and learning opportunities designed to support Members to use technology effectively in the care of their patients.

[1] https://www.acrrm.org.au/about-us/the-college/about-the-college
[2] https://www.acrrm.org.au/resources/training/curriculum

DESIGN and IMPLEMENTATION

Specialist Advice Services

The College's first digital health online platform was built in 2004. The tele-dermatology (Tele-Derm) store and forward telehealth service[3] provides a unique combination of specialist case advice to rural doctors and an extensive education library of dermatology cases, procedures and live learning opportunities through webinars. It was set up with the belief that a teledermatology service must offer ongoing education as well as a specific case consultation service, with the aim to upskill rural doctors to treat more patients locally reducing the burden of travel and the associated costs. Today the service provides advice to over 600 cases per year and has a membership of 3500 rural doctors.

The College has continued to expand this concept into the Specialties of Ophthalmology (Ophthal-Assist) and Emergency Medicine (Rural-EM).

ACRRM Rural Generalist Curriculum

The purpose of the College is to provide leadership, training and support for professionally connected rural generalist doctors to promote effective systems of care for their communities. ACRRM considers that effective systems must include the integration of digital health technologies and services. The extended skills required by rural and remote general practice doctors include comprehensive community primary care, hospital and emergency care, population health and extended specialised services included procedural skills. This full scope of general practice, or 'rural generalist medicine' as it is called, is specified in the ACRRM Fellowship Rural Generalist Curriculum.

Since 2009 the Curriculum has included a requirement for ACRRM Fellows to use technology to optimise provision of, and access to, care for patients in rural and remote areas. This includes the use of telehealth, Clinical Information Systems (CIS), shared electronic records, Secure communication, for clinical documents e.g pathology, referral and discharge, clinical decision support systems and Point of Care Testing (POCT).

By virtue of their involvement across the care continuum – from community to clinic to hospital and in the home – rural and remote doctors can offer a unique perspective on digital health and its role in improving access to services and continuity of care.

College Digital Health Support

Since 2011 the College has provided support for digital health in the form of guidelines, templates, education modules and fostering a community of practice to share ideas and learnings on implementation and use. The ACRRM website is the main repository for the education and support resources and covers the areas of Telehealth, My Health Record and Medication Management https://www.acrrm.org.au/digitalhealth

ACRRM has several online education modules dedicated to understanding digital health technologies

- Introduction to telehealth – currently being updated [4]
- Digital Health in Rural and Remote Communities [5]

[3] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajr.12248
[4] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=1057&title=Introduction+To+Telehealth
[5] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=17326

- eHealth enabled management of chronic conditions [6] - currently closed to new registrations

It also integrates digital health content into its other online education modules such as:

- Introduction to Primary Care [7]
- Introduction to Population Health [8]
- Rural Generalist Foundation skills: Digital Health [9]
- Alcohol and other Drugs [10]

Digital Inclusion Assessment Tool for Rural Doctors

Developed in 2020 the digital inclusion assessment tool is a self-assessment tool, designed to be used by the rural doctor or an organisation to assess skills and knowledge of digital health, using a capability framework. The tool will suggest training and information sources to assist both them and their communities to better use and deploy digital health within their health practices and the wider community. The tool is currently in a trial phase and can be used by both doctors in training and those engaged in continuous professional development.

Standards and Guidelines for a Digitally Connected Community

Developed in 2021 the standards describe best practices for the integration of digital technologies in clinical delivery and practice management within the context of rural and remote healthcare provision. The standards provide advice to assist communities to implement and evaluate the use of digital technologies in their support of healthcare provision. They help communities create a digital health environment which meets community needs. The intended audience for the standards includes healthcare professionals and non-clinical staff who play a key role in the daily flow of care and coordination; and people working in other sectors of the community who interact with the healthcare systems such as social care and education. The standards can also be used by organisations that service the needs of communities such as local, state and federal government and private enterprise.

The standards are designed to ensure that digital technologies are only used in a manner which improves quality and safety for people in rural and remote areas. They give guidance on the appropriateness of using digital technologies in the provision of healthcare services within a quality and safety driven framework. When people consent to services that use technology, they need to understand the limitations to their use of the technology to deliver healthcare. Any limitations (compared to in-person consultations) introduced by using the technology should be understood and managed through risk-based approaches (McConnel, F. B., Pashen, D., & McLean, R. 2007).

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[6] https://medicalrepublic.com.au/acrrm-offers-free-ehealth-course/
[7] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=18640&title=Introduction+to+Primary+Health+Care
[8] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=1026&title=Introduction+To+Population+Health

[9] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=14800&title=ACRRM+RG+Foundation+Skills%3A+Digital+Health
[10] https://mycollege.acrrm.org.au/search/find-online-learning/details?id=18668&title=Alcohol+and+Other+Drugs+-+Driving+Change+in+Communities

Telehealth Learning Program

Developed in 2021 the program provides assessment and formative feedback for Australian Rural Doctors in the use of telehealth services. The assessment is based on the ACRRM mini-clinical evaluation exercise work-based assessment and the College curriculum. Criteria has been developed to assess rural doctors' clinical performance in scenario-based clinical settings.

The telehealth learning module has been designed to emulate different acute and chronic clinical presentations for patients that are children, adults and elderly people. It includes conducting a telehealth consultation, accessing medical records, making referrals and ordering tests and medication.

Member feedback and MBS data for telehealth consultations suggest that growth has been slow in the mode of video consultations. One reason for this could be that doctors don't have the knowledge and skills to perform a video consultation to an acceptable standard.

The aim of the ACRRM Telehealth Learning Program is to improve doctors' skills in conducting a telehealth (phone or video) consultation, and confidence in their ability to meet the expectations of the patient or carer. It is anticipated that the doctors' skills will be improved through formative feedback provided by an assessor.

EVALUATION

Each of our online education courses includes an assessment activity to confirm knowledge and to attract CPD hours as part of the ACRRM professional development program. All online courses are available free to all ACRRM members including Fellows and registrars.

The trial of the telehealth learning program in 2021 will include an evaluation of the program and it's success in meeting the aim of building both competence and confidence.

The College surveys its Members on the use of digital technologies on a regular basis.

FUTURE FOCUS

As the increasing digitising of the medical world continues apace, the College will continue to be active in driving the agenda for the benefit of members. We are making plans to broaden accessibility to our telehealth learning program and to give our Members the tools they need to assess their skills and knowledge and provide them with the education and support to meet the requirements of a digitally enabled workforce.

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