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Victorian Healthcare Association

For immediate release

A regional Victorian health service that initiated an innovative workforce program to equip the region's general medical innovative to treat people with a mental illness won a major health industry award today.

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA's) 2009 Workforce Development Award went to Bendigo Health for its program that trains staff to respond to a rise in patients with a mental illness who present to Loddon Mallee region emergency departments.

Another rural health service - Kyabram and District Health - won the VHA's 2009 Population Health Award for a program to deliver best practice healthcare to patients with complex, chronic illnesses.

The awards - sponsored by human resources consultants Dakin Mayers - were presented at the VHA's Annual Conference - People Centred Healthcare Systems- at the Hilton on the Park in Melbourne today.

The VHA's chief executive, Mr Trevor Carr, said rural health services were increasingly at the forefront of innovation to deliver high quality healthcare programs within limited budgets and workforce constraints.

"These programs show that rural Victorian health services are able to offer the very best in healthcare by adopting innovative solutions to meet rising demand for health services," Mr Carr said.

Bendigo Health spokesperson Ivane St Clair said the Clinical Education Project followed the Victorian Government's Because Mental Health Matters policy that found mental health assessments should not be the exclusive domain of mental health practitioners.

Mrs St Clair said in rural areas the first point of contact for people with a mental illness is usually a general practitioner or a local hospital.

"In the absence of qualified mental health professionals there is a need for generalist medical staff to manage mental health conditions," she said.

Bendigo Health conducted pre and post program workforce interviews to determine staff attitudes to mental illness. It trained staff in a collaborative program involving Small Rural Health Services and Area Mental Health Services to give staff the competence and confidence to deal with mentally ill patients. The program includes staff debriefings after a difficult event.

"Prior to the program, staff shared common myths related to mental health and mental illness. Often underlying this was negative personal and individual nursing experiences," Mrs St Clair said.

"After training, staff demonstrated a greater preparedness to engage with those seeking mental healthcare. They also had a better insight into the significance of mental illness in people's lives and understood the importance of acceptance and the effect that positive attitudes among healthcare workers can have on patients."

The program led to the development of the Small Rural Hospitals Mental Health Network that promotes collaborative relationships between rural emergency department staff and local community mental health services.

The majority of small rural hospitals are now investigating the option of introducing mental health competencies and integrating them into workplace orientation programs.

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Bendigo Health views the project as ongoing and will continue to provide staff with access to mental health assessment tools, shared care agreements for patients who present with a mental illness and further training.

Rising rates of chronic illnesses present a new challenge for health services to provide ongoing and connected care over a longer period.

Kybram and District Health Services (KDHS) became one of the first Level C hospitals to establish a model of chronic disease care that offers multidisciplinary care pathways for people living with respiratory disease, cardiac conditions or diabetes.

Its efforts to tackle chronic disease management began in 2006 with the "Easy Breathers Program" to support people with respiratory illnesses. In 2008, the health service established a "Self-Management for Diabetes Program" for Type II diabetics. In 2009, the health service developed a "Cardiac Rehabilitation Program" to meet the needs of people who had experienced heart failure.

Already the programs have reduced hospital admissions and improved the health and wellbeing of participants.

"The Easy Breathers Program reduced chronic obstructive pulmonary disease pre and post admissions from 35 to two and emergency department admissions from nine to zero – reducing total bed days from 258 to three during the 2005-06 period," KDHS chief executive Neil Cowen said.

Dr Cowen said the Kyabram program uses the World Health Organization's People Centred Health Care policy framework and includes initial screening and needs assessment, person centred care planning, clinical assessment, self-management education programs, ongoing monitoring, review and linkages to community support.

"At all stages the patient's family, carer and local community is involved in the process that has moved away from providing traditional episodic care in favour of proactive person centred care," Dr Cowen said.

The program has used innovative technologies such as Remote Patient Monitoring devices to maximise consumer access to services and to identify early adverse trends in health measurements.

A multidisciplinary community health team oversees the program that is similar to the Hospital Admission Risk Program and Early Intervention in Chronic Disease Programs funded by the State Government in larger health services.

Chronic Disease Program manager Dianne Roberts identified the need for local solutions due to the high number of emergency department presentations by chronically ill patients. Kyabram and District Health Services also won this year's Victorian Premier's Rural Health Service of the Year Award.

The Victorian Healthcare Association is the major peak body representing the public healthcare sector in Victoria. Our members include public hospitals, rural and regional health services, community health services and aged care facilities. Established since 1938, the VHA promotes improvement of health outcomes for all Victorians from the perspective of its members.

For further information and
Interviews, contact
Trevor Carr
CEO
Victorian Healthcare Association
(03) 9094 7777 or (0409) 362 382