


Providing a localised cervical cancer screening course for general practice nurses

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ABSTRACT

Cervical cancer screening programs in Australia have been developed to detect early precancerous changes in women with a cervix aged between 25 and 74. Yet, many barriers remain to the uptake of cervical screening. Barriers include a lack of culturally appropriate service provision, physical access, poor health literacy, emotional difficulties, socio-economic disadvantage and not having access to a female service provider. In remote and very remote areas of Australia, additional barriers experienced by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples include a distrust of healthcare providers and a lack of services, resulting in a much higher rate of diagnosis and death from cervical cancer. General practice nurses (GPNs) are well placed to conduct cervical screening tests (CSTs) after they have undertaken additional education and practical training. GPNs' increase in scope of practice is beneficial to general practice as it helps to remove some barriers to cervical screening. In addition, GPNs conducting CSTs reduce GP workload and burnout and increase teamwork. GPNs working in metropolitan clinics have greater access to training facilities, whereas those working in rural and remote clinics are required to travel potentially long distances to complete practical assessments. This highlights the need for training to be made available in rural and remote areas. The aim of this forum paper is therefore to generate further discussion on the need for training programs to be made available in rural and remote areas to aid the upskilling of GPNs.

Keywords: Australia, cervical cancer screening, general practice nurse, nurse scope of practice, nurse training, nurse upskill, regional, remote, rural.

Introduction

The World Health Organization's 2020 call for countries to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem has resulted in multiple joint efforts in Australia, such as the national cervical screening program, national school-based HPV vaccination program and advertising campaigns. To aid in promotion, conversations by GPs or general practice nurses (GPNs) are needed to discuss the importance of screening and organising service delivery. In Australia, the Cervical Screening Test (CST), as part of the national cervical screening program, is essential for detecting precancerous changes among women or persons with a cervix aged between 25 and 74 (Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC) 2024). GPNs are well placed due to their accessibility in primary health care, when provided with additional training and autonomy to undertake CSTs and support the objectives of the national screening program (Merrick 2013; Holmes *et al.* 2014). This forum paper explores the benefits of providing local training programs to enable nurses working in regional and remote general practices in Australia to become cervical screening providers to avoid travelling long distances for training.

Barriers to screening

Despite the reduction in mortality (due to the success in the detection and early treatment of disease), many barriers still exist to the uptake of cervical screening among the broader population (Cancer Council of Victoria, n.d.). Within Australia, some of the barriers