

# **GP ENGAGEMENT “A NEIGHBOURHOOD APPROACH”**

## **Background**

The Department of Human Services funded eight projects across Victoria (\$10,000 each) in 2003 with the aim of progressing the engagement of General Practice in Service Coordination within Primary Health.

The Western Melbourne Division of General Practice and Brimbank-Melton Primary Care Partnership were successful in receiving funding to undertake a project that focused on referrals between Westcare Medical Centre and Djerriwarrh Health Services in Melton.

## **Project objectives**

1. To develop/improve coordinated referral and feedback processes between GPs and other primary care providers for the benefit of shared patients/clients.
2. To improve current referral pathways between general practice and other health providers by using service coordination tools.
3. To increase knowledge and develop agreed standards/protocols between primary care and general practice about what constitutes quality referral pathways for clients/patients.
4. To improve timely feedback from other primary care providers following referral from GPs.
5. Increase GPs awareness and knowledge of services through the use of the service directory and e-referral processes.
6. Build capacity and working relationships between GP practices and primary care services.
7. To develop a GP engagement model that can be transferable to other neighbourhood practices.

## **Working Group**

A Working group was set up to oversee the Project with membership from the Western Melbourne Division of General Practice, the Primary Care Partnership, Djerriwarrh Health Services, Westcare Medical Centre, Western PCP E-Business Manager, and a PCP Steering Committee member. The Working Group met on a monthly basis through the duration of the project and provided direction for participants as well as discussion and agreement on problem solving issues as they arose. Minutes were circulated promptly and members communicated via telephone and email to ensure appropriate action steps were followed.

## **Numbers and roles of personnel involved in the project**

- 14 GPs from Westcare Medical Centre and the Practice Manager
- 7 Allied Health staff from Djerriwarrh
- 7 Counselling staff from Djerriwarrh
- E-Business Manager from Western Metropolitan Region Primary Care Partnerships

- Computer consultant from Westcare
- Staff from Health Insurance Commission
- Staff member from Western Melbourne Division of General Practice
- Computer consultant / trainer from Division of General Practice
- Steering committee member from Brimbank-Melton PCP
- Project Manager from PCP
- Administrative staff from PCP

## **Training**

The training for GPs was included in a Saturday training session on the use of Medical Director software related to recall/reminder systems and pathology results. Noel Stewart, who had previously worked with Westcare, on behalf of the Western Division of General Practice, conducted the training.

The training for allied health and counselling staff was held at DJHS in the use of e-referral acknowledgement and attachment form using Connecting Care site. The training built on previous training in service coordination tools (fully implemented) and use of making a referral with the Connecting care site

The Protocols for the GP project were based on the Western Metropolitan Best Practice and Continuous Improvement Manual agreements on referral outcomes. Discussion at the Working Group followed by consultation within the respective organisations confirmed agreed timelines and acknowledgement processes.

## **The Trial**

Although the project first met in July 2003 the trial period for electronic referrals did not begin until December due to technical issues that had to be rectified before the trial could begin.

After the technical problems were overcome by the E-Business Manager and the computer consultant from Westcare, the Working Group agreed on a trial period of e-referral between Westcare Medical Centre and Djerriwarrh Health Services. Nearly all of the GPs used the Electronic Referrals to Djerriwarrh (and some other services) via Medical Director software and the Statewide referral tool templates.

Some Djerriwarrh staff also referred electronically to Westcare, and it was pleasing to note the use of acknowledgement / outcome forms.

Electronic referrals from GPs at Westcare to Djerriwarrh during the trial were:

December	3
January	14
February	11
March	14

These figures compare very favourably with the total number of paper referrals from other Medical Centres during the same period:

December	11
January	16
February	25
March	20

## **Findings**

The funding for the project acknowledged the reality that a medical practice is a business and allowed Westcare Medical Centre to participate.

There was improved communication between GPs and staff at Djerriwarrh during the trial period, which resulted in a better understanding of the patient/clients needs and appropriate treatment.

The commitment of the Information Technology personnel involved with the Project to change processes and prompt keys/drop down boxes for fast, efficient e-referral with agreed local protocols, was a significant enabler for the positive results, and is clearly adaptable to other practices.

Feedback for everyone is essential and identification of IT issues/proper underlying IT processes that simplify the process to support rapid and easy use

The uptake of electronic referral across the Division will depend on the robustness of computer technology and the commitment of the interested GP practices.

It was clear through the Project that someone is required in each agency to continually follow-up, solve issues, encourage participation and train new staff/GPs. Hence, the importance of the Practice Manager role in the GP Clinic and the Intake/Manager roles in the agency.

## **Summary**

Project timeframes demonstrated that the neighbourhood partnership approach is effective – however it demonstrated the level of commitment of all stakeholders to integrating the processes. Initial and ongoing training needed to allow process to become standard practice on a day-to-day basis

System support is essential and committed people are integral to improve community outcomes.

The “neighbourhood approach” to service coordination was successful because of the commitment of the working group members representing key stakeholders and the willingness of GPs and other health professionals to change practices to improve referral processes for patients/clients.