



Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative

Evaluation Report – South Gippsland Divisional Area GP Survey - October 2008

Background

The Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing has provided funding to support rural communities affected by drought. The *Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative* is providing \$10.1 million over two years (2007-2009) to build the capacity of rural and remote drought affected communities to respond to the psychological impact of drought. General Practice Alliance South Gippsland has been allocated funding until June 2009 to coordinate a program of drought recovery support, with the emphasis being on developing and implementing a sustainable approach to mental health support in drought affected communities.

Purpose

The purpose of collecting this information was to link all GPs in the Divisional area to the Initiative, and to obtain a snapshot overview of GPs beliefs about community awareness of, and access to, mental health support services.

Method

The method was to consult with experienced Divisional staff, including the Mental Health Program Coordinator, then to develop a short survey. Practice managers or nurses at all medical practices in the Divisional area were then telephoned, and surveys and other program information were forwarded to the practices. Completed surveys were returned by fax or mail. A copy of the survey is attached as Appendix A.

Results

70 surveys were forwarded to practices, with 15 completed surveys returned within a four week period. This represented a 21% response rate.

Most GPs (66%) rated community awareness of mental health services/resources as 'average', with 26% of GPs rating awareness as 'poor'. This data is presented in Table 1.

Most GPs believed that access to mental health services/resources was either 'good' (53%), or 'average' (33%). This data is presented in Table 2.

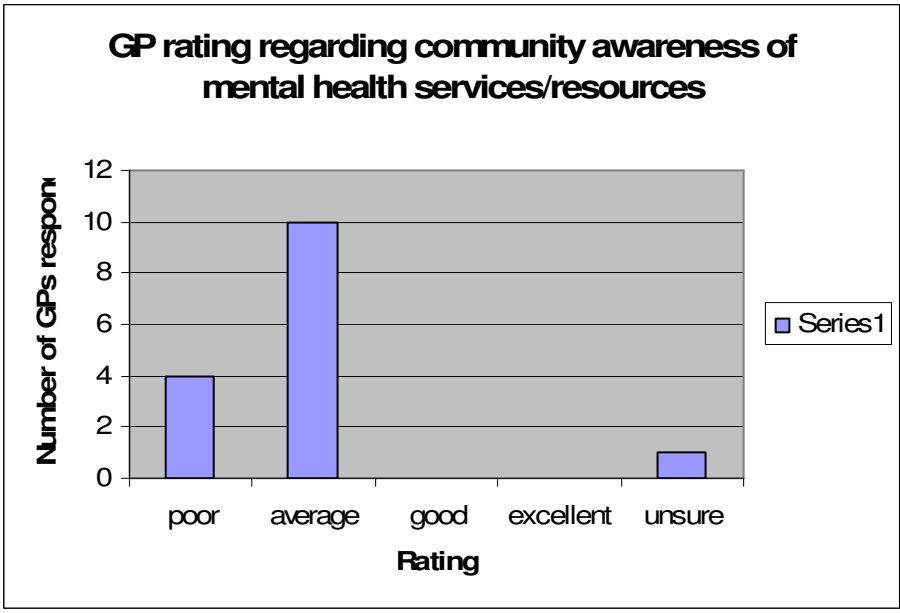


Table 1: GPs ratings of community awareness of local mental health services

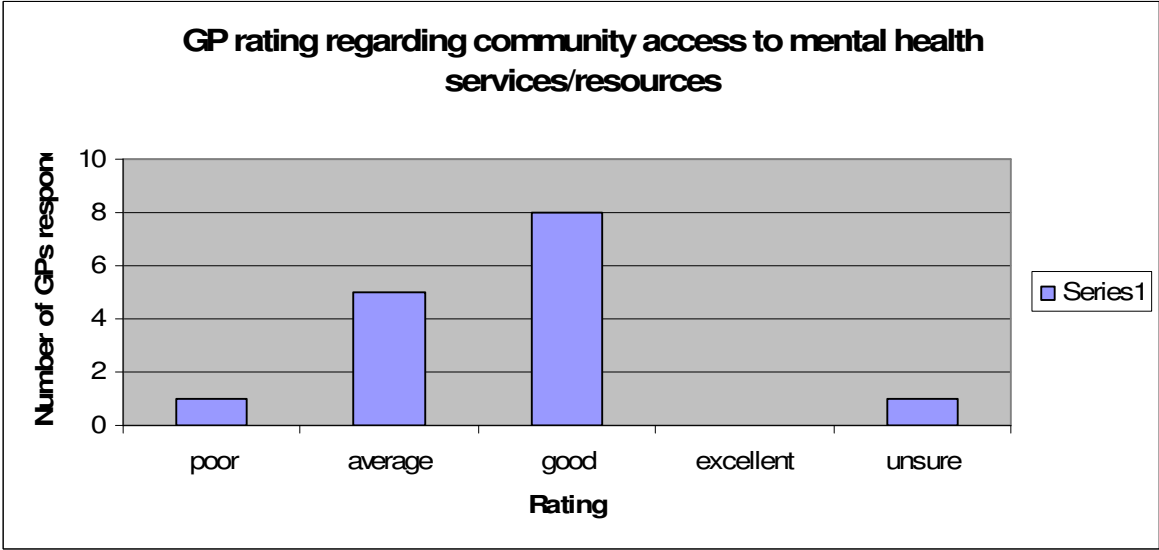


Table 2: GPs ratings of community access of local mental health services

The last survey question asked GPs to consider what resources (if any) would be helpful in their work with drought affected communities. A range of 3 options was provided (resource booklet to give to patients, local support service directory, and education/information for GPs), with a fourth option of ‘other’ to allow GPs to specify alternative ideas. Three of the returned surveys left this question blank, however all remaining 12 GPs indicated interest in at least one of the options. This data is presented in Table 3.

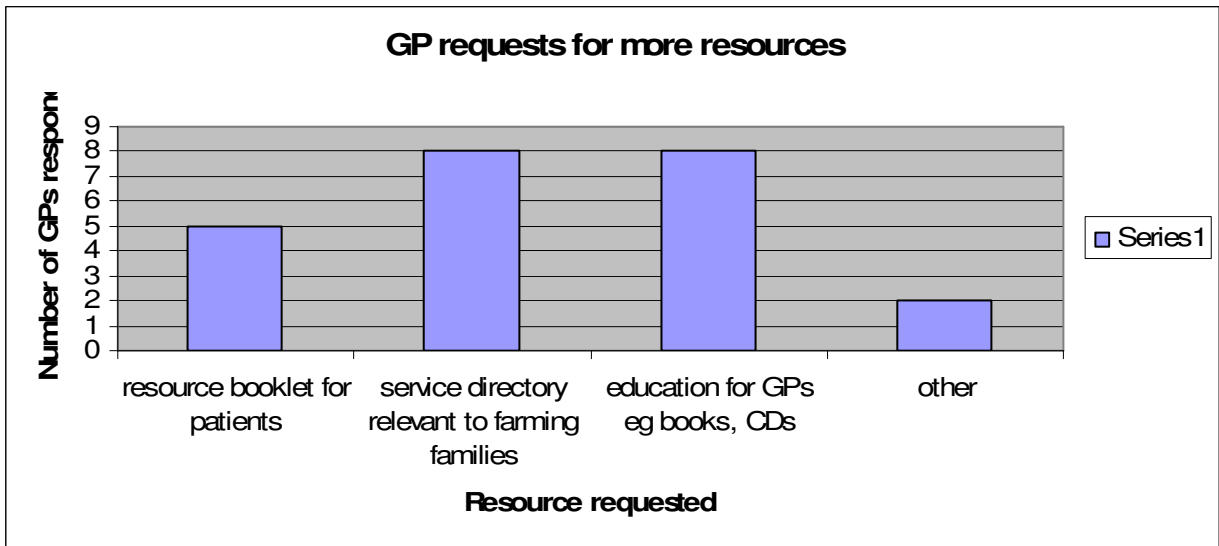


Table 3: GPs requests for more resources

Conclusions

The majority rating that community awareness of mental health services/resources is ‘poor’ or ‘average’ indicates that improvement is needed in building community knowledge about available services and how to access them. The majority rating that community access to mental health services/resources is ‘average’ or ‘good’ suggests that the pathway to accessing services is reasonably sound. It may be that a key issue in providing mental health support for drought affected communities is in assisting those communities to understand what mental health services and resources are available, when they may need to access them, and how to access them. Also, it is likely that this local community is no different to other Australian communities, whereby the stigma associated with mental illness impacts negatively on mental health service access. Mental health stigma can result in an unwillingness to be identified with a mental health problem within a small rural community. Continuing to address this issue through community education, training opportunities, and provision of mental health information within communities will be an important component of the current Initiative.

Recommendations

Given the responses in returned surveys, the following actions are recommended:

- Develop, produce and distribute to GPs a resource book for communities affected by drought, focused on stress and information about local services and resources.
- Provide more education materials, resources and information to GPs that will assist them to work effectively with drought affected communities.
- Distribute the recently developed South Gippsland and Bass Coast Rural Support Services Information Fridge Magnet to all medical practices in the Divisional area.
- Coordinate activities and events that raise community awareness of mental health services and resources, particularly relating to the impact of drought, and attempt to address the issue of stigma related to mental illness.

Appendix A – survey

Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative

Program Coordinator – Liz Craig, Phone 5674 3105 or 0437 958 713

This Department of Health and Ageing Initiative has provided funding to build the capacity of drought affected communities to respond to the psychological impact of drought, with a completion date of 30th June 2009.

Part of my role is to consult with local service providers and community groups to map services and to identify gaps in service provision/coordination. Over the last two months, I have been talking to a range of service providers and communities in the Divisional area and now invite your input.

Please complete the following questions relating to mental health support for drought affected/rural communities, and of course feel free to add any further information as you wish. Your responses will be anonymous.

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1. How do you rate the current awareness in the community (Service providers and community members) about mental health resources/services? Please tick.

Poor Average Good Excellent Unsure

2. How do you rate access to services for the local community?

Poor Average Good Excellent Unsure

3. Would you like more resources/information to assist in your work with communities that may be affected by drought or other rural challenges? Please tick all applicable boxes.

- Resource booklet to give to patients
 Simple service directory for contacts relevant to farming families and farming-related business
 Education/information for GPs e.g., books, CDs
 Other – Please specify _____

Please add any further information you would like below. Please also add your contact details if you would like me to come and talk with you in more detail about the Initiative.

Thank you for your valuable time.

