

Rural Research Capacity Building Program (RRCBP)

Research Report

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What are health professionals' perceptions of conducting routine growth assessments and lifestyle interventions? A qualitative study involving allied health professionals, nurses and doctors in rural and regional New South Wales

Background

Allied health professionals, nurses and doctors within the New South Wales (NSW) public health system provide trusted health information to a large proportion of families across the state. This means they are well positioned to opportunistically assess and discuss child weight status with families.

Prior to 2016, weight status was not routinely addressed in most NSW public health settings, however recent policy changes promote quarterly growth assessments for all children aged under 16 years who attend these facilities. The Ministry of Health recommend health professionals use the 5 As framework, a consultation approach to encourage behaviour change, to identify and manage children with overweight or obesity.

This study aimed to explore allied health professionals', nurses' and doctors' perceptions of conducting routine growth assessments and providing lifestyle support to families in a local health district in rural and regional NSW, Australia.

Methods

This descriptive, qualitative study involved online focus groups and semi-structured interviews with health professionals. Audio recordings were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis, with rounds of data consolidation between research team members.

Results

Allied health professionals, nurses and doctors who work in a variety of settings within a local health district of NSW participated in one of four

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Emma is a Health Promotion Officer working for Mid North Coast Local Health District. As a 2019 RRCBP candidate she completed a descriptive, qualitative study exploring health professionals' perceptions of routine growth assessments and brief lifestyle interventions in inpatient, outpatient and community health settings.

Emma is now completing her PhD further exploring how health professionals are addressing overweight and obesity in children in clinical settings and families' perceptions of the intervention.



focus groups (n = 18 participants) or semi-structured interviews (n = 4).

The predominant themes related to: (1) health professionals' professional identity and their perceived scope of practice; (2) interpersonal qualities of health professionals; (3) the service delivery ecosystem in which health professionals worked. Diversity in attitudes and beliefs about routine growth assessments were not necessarily specific to discipline or setting.

Conclusion

Allied health professionals, nurses and doctors recognise the complexities involved in conducting routine growth assessments and providing lifestyle support to families. The 5 As framework used

in NSW public health facilities to encourage behaviour change may not allow clinicians to address these complexities in a patient centred way.

The findings of this research will be used to inform future strategies aimed at embedding preventive health discussions into routine clinical practice, and to support health professionals to identify and manage children with overweight or obesity.

Keywords

BMI-for-age, body weights and measures, health occupations, health professional perceptions, lifestyle intervention, obesity screening, paediatric overweight and obesity, preventive healthcare.