

Category:

Strengthen primary health and continuing care for the community

Title

Cant' Hear? Hard to Learn

Abstract

Otitis media in Aboriginal communities affects up to ten times more than the 4% that the World Health Organisation considers a massive public health problem (AIHW, 2005).

In NSW, the rate of hospitalisation for otitis media is lower for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal children; however the prevalence of otitis media in Aboriginal communities is significantly higher, with more severe impacts.

The Aboriginal Can't Hear? Hard to Learn program was designed and implemented by the Aboriginal Health staff of Greater Southern Area Health Service and Katungul Aboriginal Medical service to address the issue of Otitis Media in Aboriginal children in the Eurobodalla, Bega Valley, Monaro and Southern Tablelands Clusters.

Aim

This partnership program informs and educates Aboriginal communities about Otitis Media, screens children for the condition, makes referrals where necessary and supports with treatment, while working with mainstream health professionals.

Nature of the problem

Otitis Media is a condition that impacts on many Aboriginal children. Cant' Hear? Hard to Learn is an innovative program that encompasses regular ear health screening for Aboriginal children, education for parents and caregivers and hearing health training for Aboriginal Health workers.

It has led to the establishment of an Ear Nose and Throat outreach clinic at Goulburn that operates four times per year. The clinic treats up to 24 children in the clinic and 8 children having surgical procedures.

Extent of the problem

Otitis Media (also known as runny or glue ear) is a common childhood illness. At least 75%-80% of all Aboriginal children have had at least one episode of Otitis Media by the age of five. Unfortunately this disease can continue throughout a child's school life if left untreated. Otitis Media is at least 10 times more common among Aboriginal children than the rest of the population and as many as 8 out of 10 of Aboriginal children may have Otitis Media and associated hearing loss at some time during any school year.

Otitis media has been highlighted as a major health and social problem for Aboriginal communities, especially young people which in turn have a high impact on educational outcomes. Further to this many Aboriginal families

continue to face barriers in accessing appropriate hearing health and specialist medical services to address Otitis Media.

Strategic importance

This program relates to:

- the strategic directions of NSW Health: Aboriginal health P. 24 ...There will be an initial focus on Otitis Media screening...,
- the GSAHS Chief Executive's Performance Agreement 2006 – 2007 in the Aboriginal Health Strategies - Otitis Media Screening Program for Aboriginal Children
- The NSW Otitis Media Strategic Plan for Aboriginal children (NSW Health 2000)
- The Recommendation for Clinical Care Guidelines on management of otitis media in Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander Populations (Morris et al.2001).
- The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) Management of Middle Ear Infection in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Populations (NACCHO 2001)

Planning and implementation solutions

A team approach is used for the 'Can't Hear? Hard to Learn' program and was made up of a number of agencies including:

- GSAHS workers and Nurse Audiometrists,
- GSAHS Management: Aboriginal Health, Community Health, and Nurse Unit Managers.
- Katungul Aboriginal Medical Service Staff
- Ear Nose and Throat Specialist from Westmead
- Goulburn Base Hospital Theatre staff

The ability to work together in partnership is an essential part of the program and the programs success. GSAHS has a very supportive and successful partnership with the local Katungul, Aboriginal Medical Service, Department of Education and Training, the Aboriginal Community and Pre-schools which allows for the provision of a very efficient and structured service to Aboriginal communities and more specifically their children.

The major innovation of this program is the establishment of an outreach clinic at Goulburn Base Hospital, which is regularly attended by an Ear Nose and Throat specialist from Westmead Children's Hospital.

Aboriginal Health Education Officers from GSAHS along with staff from Katungul Aboriginal Medical Service, coordinate, manage and arrange transport and accommodation for families from surrounding areas and districts for:

- Assessment of children's ear health and referrals to the outreach clinic if necessary.
- Appropriate management and treatment of ear disease including surgery

- Regular follow-up and monitoring of children identified as otitis media prone
- Education for parents and Teachers and children with ear disease
- Cultural Awareness training for non- Aboriginal health workers that are involved in the program.

The Aboriginal 'Can't Hear? Hard to Learn' program incorporates the existing screening and education program conducted by the Aboriginal Health Workers and Nurse Audiometrists for Aboriginal Children and their families. The screening is conducted in conjunction with Katungul Aboriginal Medical Service.

Outcomes and evaluation

Screening throughout the GSAHS for 2005 -2006 indicate that the Otitis Media screening target of 1614 clients was exceeded with 2147 being screened, which represents 93% of eligible clients.

Complete records are kept for each child screened, referrals and follow-up is noted and actioned as necessary. Contact is maintained with families who have referrals to the Goulburn clinics and support is provided for children who are required to attend these clinics.

The 'Cant' Hear? Hard to Learn' program produced positive clinical outcomes for the Aboriginal children who visit the outreach clinic.

Clinical Outcomes that are evident are:

- Improving the access of Aboriginal children to specialist services through addressing and reducing barriers.
- Establishing a culturally appropriate health service for Aboriginal children
- Improving the opportunity for Aboriginal children to access early intervention and receive early treatment for ear disease
- Improve children's hearing and learning
- Improve the health status of children
- The diagnosis and appropriate treatment of potentially life threatening conditions in Aboriginal children

Sustaining change

Aboriginal Health Workers, non-Aboriginal workers and parents note that many children have had positive behaviour changes and are happier, communicating better, interacting better with others and coping better with the surrounding environment as a result of accessing the program. Parents reported a number of issues such as:

- Previously many Aboriginal children with otitis media were misdiagnosed as 'slow' learners. After treatment their development has been corrected. Children now can hear and communicate with families
- Parents don't have to wait lengthy periods and watch their children suffer and fall behind at school

- Parents feel the program staff have given them a high level of understanding and satisfaction not received from other mainstream services

The success of the 'Cant' Hear? Hard to Learn' program is due to the dedicated staff and financial support from GSAHS management and the NSW Aboriginal Health Unit.

Future Scope

This program will continue in its current format for as long as the need exists.

This program can be adapted in other health service areas where there are dedicated Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health service providers who are willing to move outside of the traditional health setting.