

## Title

Supported follow-up through the Juvenile Justice Centre Release Treatment Scheme improves continuity of health care for young people being released from custody.

## Abstract

The Juvenile Justice Centre Release Treatment Scheme (JJCRTS) pilot project is designed to improve the number of young people accessing health care in the community following release from custody. A randomised controlled trial methodology was implemented with participants being allocated to either the JJCRTS intervention or usual care group. Data from the project at the twelve-month point indicates that young people allocated to the intervention group had at three months greater improvements in their level of access to health care, improved levels of engagement with their family/carer(s) with respect to health care and improved treatment compliance. This project is an initiative of the 2003 NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse (NSW Government, 2003) and has been underway since November 2005.

## Aim

To demonstrate that supported follow-up for young people leaving custody in NSW leads to improvements in access to health care, increased health care engagement with family/carers and improved treatment compliance.

## Nature of the Problem

The NSW Young People in Custody Survey (NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, 2003) demonstrated that young people in custody are primarily from disadvantaged backgrounds characterised by family disruption, poor educational attainment, regular risk taking behaviour as well as poor health status compared with the general community. Eighty-eight percent of respondents to the survey reported symptoms consistent with a clinical mental health disorder. Approximately 95% reported a history of drug use.

Approximately 50% of young people coming into custody in NSW are Aboriginal. In the Orana Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) this percentage is usually much higher at around 80% or more.

## Extent of the problem

The extent of the problem was determined through:

1. Evaluations of areas of need identified Dubbo and the surrounding region as having high incidences of both mental health and drug and alcohol issues amongst young people leaving the Orana JJC.
2. Conducting focus groups with young people in the Orana JJC to gauge their perceived post release needs.
3. Research and discussion with services available in the Orana region including Area Health Services, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and non-government organisations about perceived needs, current gaps and challenges in providing health services to young people post-release.

This identified that young people:

- Reported transport difficulties in attending health services.
- Perceived some services as not 'youth friendly'.
- Were less likely to attend appointments if made far in advance.
- Often perceived their lives as too disorganised to follow up with healthcare needs.

### Strategic importance

This project aligns with NSW Health Strategic Direction 3 – Strengthen primary health and continuing care in the community and Strategic Direction 4 – Build regional and other partnerships for health. (NSW Department of Health, 2007). Justice Health provides comprehensive health services for all young people in custody in NSW (Justice Health, 2006). Through assessment of individual post release needs prior to release from custody and development of a supported post release care plan continuity of health care will be improved. By addressing health issues this may also lead to reduced re-offending which aligns with the NSW State Plan Priority R2: Reducing re-offending (NSW Government, 2006).

### Planning and implementing solutions

The JJCRTS Health Professional was recruited in November 2005 with the position being filled by a Clinical Nurse Consultant. Following initial orientation to this role the JJCRTS Health Professional set about establishing relationships with relevant stakeholder organisations such as local health services, Aboriginal Medical Services and non-Government organisations in the catchment area, which included the geographical area within 150 kilometres of Dubbo. This enabled the JJCRTS Health Professional based in the Dubbo/Wellington area to be able to travel to assess participants whilst in custody, create treatment plans and facilitate community follow-up and treatment.

All young people in custody in the Orana Juvenile Justice Centre who were in custody for ten days or more were assessed for suitability for inclusion in the project. Participants were recruited to the JJCRTS Pilot Project by referral from a Justice Health Nurse, DJJ Psychologist, DJJ Alcohol or Other Drug Counsellor or from another worker in the Juvenile Justice Centre.

To be included on the pilot project participants:

- Had to be returning to the designated project areas.
- Have a history of drug or alcohol misuse.
- With a current mental illness must be compliant with their medication.
- Not have a history of a serious violent or sexual offence

If participants did not meet these criteria they were deemed ineligible.

The worker followed them up in the community with involvement of the participant's family. This follow-up consisted of improving the young person's and family's health literacy, support to attend ongoing health appointments with local services and advocacy for the young person with healthcare and other services. Participants were encouraged to set their own health goals for participation on the programme and these were re-visited frequently to see if they had been achieved.

## Outcomes and Evaluation

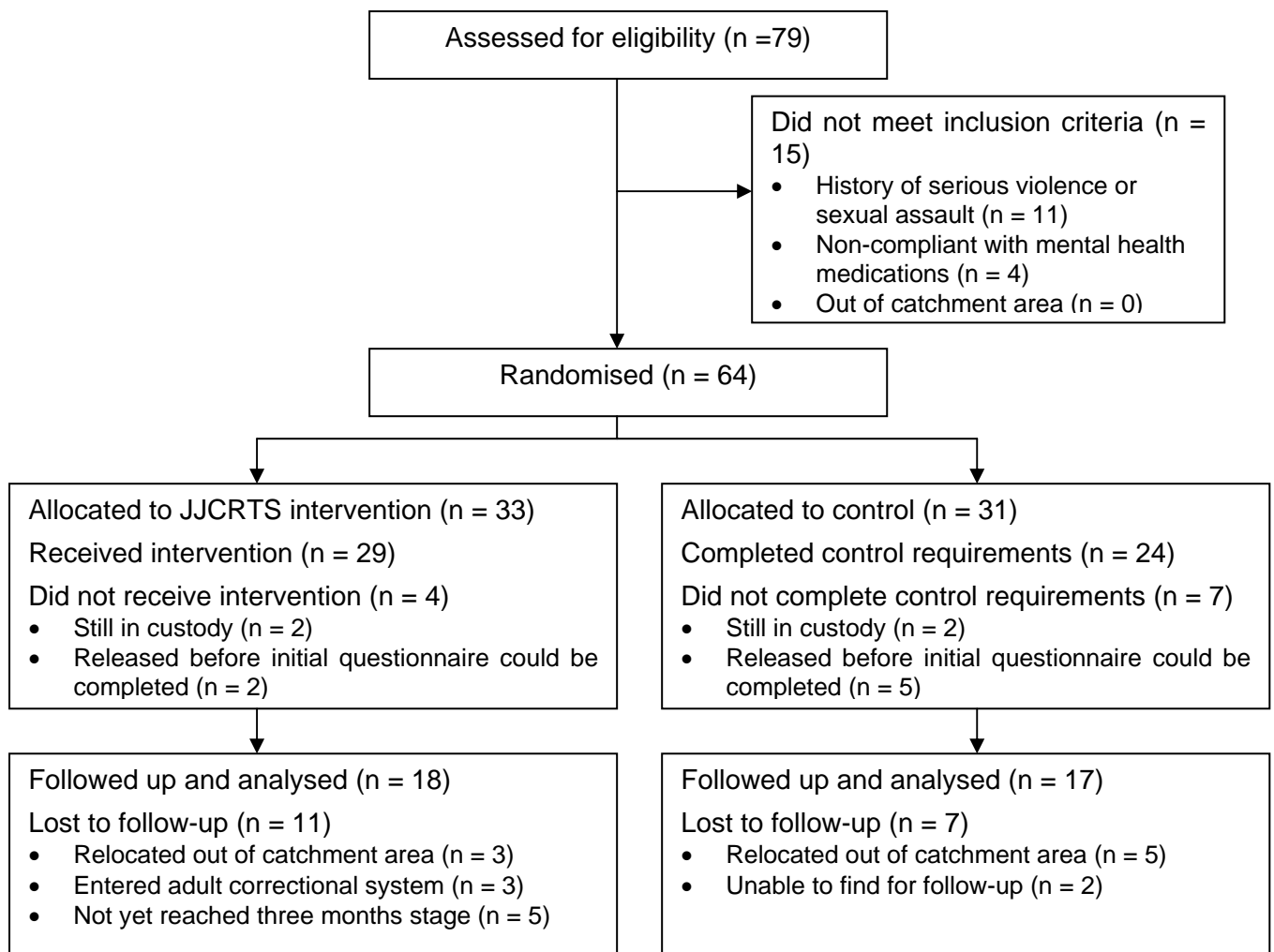
To assess the effectiveness of the first twelve months of the project a non-blinded randomised controlled trial methodology was implemented. This trial involved participants being placed in either the intervention group or to usual care (control) group. Outcome measures were collected for both groups.

Data from the project at the twelve-month point indicates that young people allocated to the JJCRTS group at three-month had:

- Greater improvements in their level of access to health care (84% for JJCRTS group against 53% for usual care group)
- Improved levels of engagement with their family/carer(s) with respect to health care (82% for JJCRTS group)
- Improved their compliance with treatment (35% for JJCRTS group)
- The mean number of weeks since previous admission to a DJJ centre improved more for the JJCRTS group (4.3 weeks longer) than for the usual care group (1.0 week shorter)

In addition to this young people on the JJCRTS program indicated a strong preference to continue contact with the JJCRTS Health Professional. There was also wide acceptance of the program amongst Justice Health and DJJ staff involved with the project.

The progress of participants through the project is shown in the following diagram:



### Sustaining change

To sustain changes created by this program the following changes have been made:

1. Increased linkages with other agencies – this program have strengthened ties with relevant services in the Orana region including both health and Department of Juvenile Community Services.
2. Continuation of focus on working with caregivers – working with families and/or carers of young people to empower them to advocate effectively for their health care.
3. Continued focus on including young people regarding suggestions and improvements to the project.
4. Use of the evaluation of the JJCRTS pilot project to inform ongoing broader service development and planning.

### Future Scope

The JJCRTS pilot project has demonstrated an effective approach to improving continuity of health care with a group that are often seen as being difficult to follow-up and engage. Lessons learnt from this pilot project can now be replicated in other areas

within NSW including lessons learnt. It has also enabled greater knowledge regarding issues facing young people on being released from custody in NSW. There is also scope for possibly extending this project to include young people appearing before Children's Courts so that increased access to health care can occur for young people placed on non-custodial orders.

#### References

1. NSW Government, 2003. *NSW Summit on Alcohol Abuse: Interim Report*. ISBN: 0 7313 33128.
2. NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, 2003. *NSW Young People in Custody Health Survey: Key Findings Report*. ISBN: 0 7347 6518 5.
3. NSW Department of Health, 2007. *A New Direction for NSW: State Health Plan*. ISBN: 1 7418 70143
4. Justice Health 2005-6 Annual Report, 2006. Available at [http://www.justicehealth.nsw.gov.au/pubs/jh\\_ar\\_05-06.pdf](http://www.justicehealth.nsw.gov.au/pubs/jh_ar_05-06.pdf)
5. NSW Government, 2006. *A New Direction for NSW: State Plan*. ISBN: 0 7313 3251 2