Abstract title: Speech Pathology Teletherapy in rural schools and preschools: Evaluating feasibility and efficacy

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Abstract (limit 250 words)

Royal Far West, a charity which offers health services for rural NSW children provided speech pathology telehealth services to over twenty schools and preschools as part of partnership. Children were assessed pre and post treatment at their rural school or preschool by a speech pathologist and received fortnightly video conferenced speech therapy sessions during school terms. Caregivers were encouraged to participate. Home and school programming, and training of school and preschool staff were provided. The wide age-range and range of disorders treated via teletherapy directly into schools is innovative in Australia.

This study applied an evidence-based evaluation framework to a large and representative group of approximately 150 children. The feasibility of the teletherapy approach was evaluated by collecting treatment process data and eliciting the opinions of stakeholders during qualitative interviews. The efficacy of the teletherapy approach was evaluated by measuring the children’s outcomes and the extent to which the children’s treatment goals were achieved. The reviews were performed by clinicians blinded to the child’s pretreatment and treatment performance. School principals, staff, preschool directors, therapy facilitators and some parents were interviewed to ensure stakeholder perspectives were included in the evaluation.

The results of this study demonstrate that speech pathology services delivered via videoconferencing are feasible. The preliminary outcome data suggest that it may also be effective in achieving children’s speech pathology goals. Stakeholder perceptions of areas to be considered when planning and implementing such a service, and some insights into facilitating engagement between health and education systems are also provided.
Rural and remote areas of Australia is home to 34% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003), but only 3.9% of Australia’s speech pathologists are primarily employed in such areas (Lambier & Atherton, 2003). A majority of families requiring speech pathology services experience significant barriers to accessing these services (O’Callaghan McAllister, & Wilson, 2005). Research has identified improving access to services especially in rural areas, as a likely benefit of using telehealth in speech pathology clinical practice (Hill & Miller, 2012).

Australian clinicians are using a wide range of technologies to deliver a variety of speech pathology services at a distance (Hill & Miller, 2012). Most research has focused on services to adult clients, and on assessment, (Reynolds et al, 2009; Fairweather, Parkin, & Rozsa, 2004).

There is a need for further research that investigates the efficiency, effectiveness and accessibility implications of broad-based paediatric speech pathology telehealth programmes. This research aims to investigate these issues and will contribute significantly to enhancing the current body of knowledge related to improving access to speech pathology services, including increasing speech pathology services directly into New South Wales schools and preschools and servicing rural Australia.
METHOD: Structured in-depth interviews with participants and stakeholders, was used to gather stakeholders’ perceptions regarding the teletherapy service. Quantitative data including Goal Attainment Scales results, assessment and review results and process data was also gathered.

RESULTS: Qualitative results show that stakeholders were satisfied with the teletherapy service. Technology issues were not viewed as barriers but some scheduling and location issues were. Most stakeholders indicated they would like more parent/carer or classroom teacher involvement. Preliminary results suggest that teletherapy was effective in achieving children’s speech pathology goals.

CONCLUSIONS: Speech pathology teletherapy is feasible and may be effective for school-age children.

REFERENCES: