

# Developing competencies for rural and remote allied health professionals in Western Australia

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In Australia and internationally there is currently a focus on identifying the skills and competencies needed within the health workforce. There are a number of reasons for this. First, identifying competencies needed within health ensures the workforce meets health need. This potentially allows for the exploration of extended, or different, roles for those working in the health arena. Second, for health services, competencies may be used to support their workforce and in service planning. Finally, for health workers 'on the ground' competencies may be used for professional development and review. These reasons are particularly relevant to the challenges currently facing the rural and remote health care environment. To date there is an absence of competencies that encompass the interprofessional commonalities in allied health practice, particularly for rural and remote Allied Health Professionals (AHPs).

Based on work undertaken in the UK [1], competencies can be conceptualised as three intersecting broad domains: generic competency; professional competency and technical competency. Generic competency includes skills shared by all those within a health organisation and are not specific to health service provision roles e.g. leadership and management, communication & interpersonal skills. Professional competence refers to skills shared by those in a health care role and are required by all health professionals or a specific subset e.g. allied health competencies, and health professional competencies. Technical competence describes skills relevant to a specific context, setting or patient group and may include profession specific competencies, specialty specific competencies or program specific competencies. This includes profession specific clinical competencies which are generally specified on a discipline specific basis by professional associations, governing boards, or program leadership organisations.

The aim of this project was to support the professional development of Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) working within the WA Country Health Service (WACHS). WACHS has developed workplace interprofessional competencies for base grade and senior AHPs, primarily within the realm of professional competencies. These are the 'Allied Health Rural and Remote Professional Competencies' (EPC) and the 'Allied Health Senior Rural and Remote Professional Competencies' (SC) respectively. Together these frameworks provide a mechanism to support the professional development and career progression of AHPs within WACHS.

The development of each framework has involved several stages. Literature reviews were undertaken to identify key literature sources and existing competency frameworks to inform the development of these documents. Draft competency documents were developed, synthesising the results of the literature review and competencies previously developed by the WACHS Allied Health Reference Group. Finally, extensive consultation was undertaken with AHPs within WACHS to finalise the draft bank of competencies considered necessary for both base grade and senior staff.

The final competency documents capture the role of base grade and senior staff respectively. The final EPC framework is comprised of 60 competencies, while the final SC framework consists of 88. Within each framework competencies are organised under eight domain areas, including: service delivery; quality and safety; professional skills; equity, access and diversity; clinical management; development and support; clinical skills; and ethical practice. The two frameworks together provide a complementary,

developmentally progressive performance review and management system. The complete competencies may be accessed online at: <http://www.wacountry.health.wa.gov.au/alliedhealthcompetencies>

The frameworks have been designed to have multiple applications for AHPs within WACHS. Individually or with peers, the tool may be used by AHPs to identify areas of work proficiency and need in developing a continuous professional development plan. The frameworks may also be used in organisational performance development processes. This has particular utility in situations where AHPs, in particular senior AHPs, are managed by people from different professional backgrounds. Finally the tools can be used broadly to identify common areas of development need across multiple professions in the AHP workforce, enabling WACHS to develop targeted training in line with need. There is potential to extend this function further as these frameworks align with elements of development frameworks employed by other health professions in WACHS, such as nursing.

Whilst these competencies are designed to meet the organisational requirements of WACHS, we believe they will have be relevant for AHPs in other rural and remote areas within Australia, and may contribute to further discussion on competencies within Australian health care more broadly.

## Reference

1. Skills for Health. *Skills for Health*. 2008 [cited 2008 20 October ]; Available from: <http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/page/competences/completed-competences/list>.

## Presenter

**Ivan Lin** is from Geraldton in Western Australia. He works as a remote and rural allied health academic with WA's University Department of Rural Health, and physiotherapist with Geraldton's Aboriginal Medical Service. His work and research interests include allied health service delivery, musculoskeletal injury, and educating students for the challenges of rural/remote and Aboriginal health contexts.