

Telemental health key to reaching rural communities

4 February 2014, by Kelly Stone



The potential for telemental health services to make a real difference in rural and remote communities is the focus of a special conference being held at the University of South Australia this month.

Conference convenor and UniSA researcher Dr Susan Simpson says telemental healthcare is the use of video-conferencing technology by psychologists and psychiatrists based in cities to provide mental health services to people living in rural areas.

With a shortage of psychologists across rural Australia, Dr Simpson says telemental healthcare provides an innovative method of therapy delivery that overcomes geographical boundaries and costs associated with travel.

"Access to psychology services in rural Australia is sparse, with only a small proportion of those in remote areas able to secure regular psychological treatments," Dr Simpson says.

"Rural populations are subject to unique, often unpredictable stressors that impact their mental health. Farmers are particularly exposed to

adverse conditions, including erratic weather, droughts, floods and bushfires, while Indigenous Australians are also vulnerable."

Dr Simpson says research to date shows telemental healthcare is as beneficial as face-to-face therapy, however its growth to address demand has been relatively slow.

"Increasing growth in telemental health services will allow [mental health professionals](#) to reach out to more people in rural and remote communities," Dr Simpson says.

"Video-conferencing holds promise as a viable means of delivering high quality [mental health services](#) to people with access-to-care barriers – not just those in [rural areas](#), but also people with disabilities who might find travel difficult and for those who are incarcerated."

The Telemental Health Research and Practice in Video-conference for Psychology and Psychiatry Conference is being held at UniSA's City West Campus on February 21. It will unpack research into telemental healthcare from leading academics and practitioners across Australia.

Dr Simpson – herself a researcher in the field for more than 15 years – says the conference is the first of its kind in Australia and will bring together expert speakers from across the country.

Speakers include Dr Simpson and her UniSA colleagues including Penelope Richards, Lorenzo Guerrini and Toby Gray; Shirley Rochford from Country Health SA, who works as Team Leader for the Port Augusta Community Mental Health Team; Dr Pallavi Dham from SA Health's Rural and Remote Network; as well as research academics from universities around Australia.

The conference program will address three key themes: research and evidence on the use of video

therapy for psychology and psychiatry; preparation and logistical considerations for setting up a service; and clinical applications of video therapy service.

The conference is designed to offer psychologists, psychiatrists and [mental health](#) professionals the opportunity to learn how to develop a telemental health service, and will highlight prominent issues which support and challenge the development of these services in Australia. The conference will conclude with a panel discussion to summarise the position of telemental [health services](#), consider future directions and develop an action plan.

Provided by University of South Australia

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