

**Health policy and rural health services: Using qualitative methodologies in policy analysis.**

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**Background:** Equity, access, safety and quality are prominent themes in rural health policies at a national level. These policies often contain objectives around improving rural health services and the health status of rural Australians. It is important to consider whether these objectives are being met for rural populations to discern the appropriateness of current policies and the potential need for changes in policy approach.

**Objective:** To understand the influence of policy on provision of, and access to, rural maternity care.

**Design:** Analysis of policy and case studies.

**Setting:** Four north Queensland rural towns.

**Participants:** (a) Rural residents who recently accessed maternity care; and (b) health care professionals involved in the provision of maternity services including midwives, procedural medical practitioners and GPs.

**Main outcome measures:** Identification of predominant themes in government policies that relate to rural maternity care and identification of outcomes for local maternity services. These findings were supplemented by insights to rural citizens' experiences in accessing maternity care and rural clinicians' experience in providing care.

**Results:** The findings indicate a dearth of specific policies to support the development and continuation of rural maternity care services.

**Conclusions:** Without detailed policy support for rural maternity care, services at each of the four case study towns appeared more vulnerable to the effects of other non-specific policies and negative environmental factors.

[Conference abstract for invited presentation at 2<sup>nd</sup> Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium. 9-11 June, 2010. Brisbane, Australia.]