

MEDIA RELEASE

Buloke set to help improve ear, nose, and throat care

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A new research project is seeking Buloke community members who have experiences accessing healthcare for ear, nose, and throat (ENT) problems.

With higher-than-average cases of hospitalisations for ENT conditions, the Buloke region has been selected as a research site by La Trobe University researcher, Susan O'Neill.

As an industry partner of La Trobe University, Murray PHN is supporting Susan with her PhD research project, which is investigating ENT care and access in the Murray region.

Over the past four years, Mildura-based Susan has been working to build on the Grattan Institute's 'Perils of Place' report, which identified Donald and Swan Hill, in the Murray PHN region, as 'hotspots' or high-risk areas for potentially preventable hospitalisations of ENT conditions.

In the project's first study with audiologists, Susan learnt that access, long wait times, and lack of local healthcare professionals were barriers to care, which can be addressed by making improvements to primary health care – people's first point of care.

The recently published hospital presentation data, analysed in phase two of the study, revealed 15 postcodes with higher-than-normal hospital presentations for upper respiratory tract infections, 14 postcodes for acute tonsillitis, and 12 postcodes for otitis media in the Murray PHN region. *LINK to study <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-023-16448-3> (available open access).*

The people most likely to be hospitalised were:

- aged birth to nine years old
- from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or
- from First Nations Communities.

Birchip ranked highly for upper respiratory conditions and acute tonsillitis, with 50 per cent of tonsillitis hospital presentation cases being in people 15 to 19 years old, which is unique in comparison with other hotspots.

Given these findings, the Buloke region has been selected as a dedicated case study site, to map existing services and speak to community members to better understand both access and barriers to care.

"This hotspot analysis will give us a new method of examining preventable hospitalisations that can be applied to any condition or region, which will ultimately lead to more timely and responsive healthcare services," Dr Nerida Hyett, Murray PHN PhD Supervisor, said.

The findings will be used to inform future service planning, clinical referral processes, resources, and health promotion activities.

Murray PHN CEO Matt Jones said it is well known that people living in rural and regional areas experience poorer health outcomes than their city counterparts.

“Your postcode should not impact your healthcare but in rural and regional areas, we know it’s harder to see a healthcare professional, and that there are often greater distances to travel to receive specialist care.

“This research is demonstrating some of those disparities and possible solutions, that will be applicable to our region and beyond.

“As rural health reform is yet to fully recognise the importance of funding local solutions for regional coordination and local co-design, research such as this is vital.”

Local community members who have accessed healthcare for ENT conditions either for themselves, or as a carer or parent, are invited to share their experiences as part of the research.

Interviews can be by phone, video call or in-person and will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Participants will be offered a \$30 grocery voucher for their time.

To get involved, email Susan.ONeill@latrobe.edu.au or call 03 4040 4300.

Research links:

- A five-year descriptive analysis of potentially preventable hospitalisations for Ear, Nose, and Throat conditions in regional Victoria, Australia, from 2015 to 2020 (published Aug. 2023) <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-023-16448-3>
- Audiologists’ perspective on the treatment of ear-related ear, nose, and throat conditions in rural Victoria (published Nov. 2021) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajr.12810>

About Murray PHN:

Murray PHN is one of 31 PHNs (Primary Health Networks) around Australia working to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of primary health care and service systems. Across our region, we work with general practitioners (GPs), community health, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs), pharmacy, aged care, and allied health practitioners, and with acute services such as hospitals, specialists, and emergency care.

The role of PHNs is to help to support and integrate the work of these important services to ensure that the people get the right care, in the right place, at the right time. In the Murray PHN region, which covers almost 100,000 sq km of regional Victoria, we work to develop and maintain sustainable models of primary health care for our communities.

Contact details

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