



SUBMISSION TO EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO GENERAL HEALTH SCREENING OF CHILDREN AT PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY SCHOOL LEVEL.

Inquiry Terms of Reference

- 1) Appraisal of the adequacy and availability of screening processes for hearing, vision, speech, motor skill difficulties and general health.
- 2) An assessment of access to appropriate services that address issues identified by an appropriate screening process.

Submissions

The Committee invites written submissions on matters relating to the above terms of reference.

Perth Primary Care Network Limited Submission

Background

Perth Primary Care Network Ltd (PPCN) came into being in January 2008 as a result of an amalgamation of the Perth and Hills Division of General Practice and the Perth Central Coastal Division of General Practice (trading as GP Coastal). Both organisations had been in operation since the early 1990's, and PPCN serves +/- 550 general practitioners operating out of 143 practices. The amalgamation created the largest division of general practice in Western Australia which services a diverse demographic area from the western suburbs including Mossman Park, Nedlands and Cottesloe in the west, to the eastern suburbs including Midland and further afield to Bullsbrook, Wooroloo, Gidgegannup and Pickering Brook in the east. We aim to positively impact the health of our community by providing valuable solutions and services that assist our community to benefit from change in primary health care.

Since 1967 Telethon Speech & Hearing Centre (TSH) has assisted thousands of speech, language and hearing-impaired children to reach their potential by learning to listen and speak. The Centre was established by a group of parents to meet the education and support needs of their hearing-impaired children. A highly qualified and expert interdisciplinary therapy team works with children from the time of diagnosis to develop age appropriate speaking, listening and thinking skills. The Centre's Ear Clinic provides children with GP treatment for conditions such as glue ear (Otitis Media). Children's hearing is assessed by on site Audiologists who refer, if required, to the clinic's consultant ENT surgeons.

Area of Concern for PPCN and TSH

Otitis media is a common condition of childhood affecting 80% of children at least once before the age of 4 years. It accounts for the highest number of prescriptions in children and the second highest number of hospital admissions for children after asthma.

The resulting hearing loss caused by Otitis media can have a significant negative impact on a child's speech, language, educational and behavioural development. Children experiencing chronic Otitis Media in infancy can show up to two years delay in reading and communication skills development, and that this delay can continue well into their educational years. The significant incidence of Otitis media in Aboriginal children is well documented and it is thought to compromise the quality of life in one third of the aboriginal population¹.

Aboriginal children can be disadvantaged in the classroom, either through a current hearing loss, or the impact of an earlier hearing loss on their language and development of listening skills. Most classroom learning is based upon the ability to listen effectively and to use Standard Australian English, particularly when learning to read and write. Undiagnosed ear health problems can lead to permanent hearing loss, significant language delay and lifelong learning problems.

Services Offered by the 2 organisations

TSH provides newborn hearing screening services in private maternity hospitals in WA. It provides the only regional newborn screening program at St John of God Hospital in Bunbury. This service was introduced to allow parents of babies born in the private sector access to vital newborn hearing screening which was not previously available other than to babies born in the public sector.

Since June 2006, TSH has collaborated with the WA Department of Health in an innovative program aimed at "at risk" communities where there is an unusually high incidence of middle ear problems. The project deploys a Variety WA funded Mobile Children's Ear Clinic, a specially equipped bus fitted with equipment and screeners who are trained to screen children's ear health and hearing. The aim of the Ear Bus is to screen children in these groups and identify those with ear health problems so that appropriate treatment can be implemented and managed to achieve better long term outcomes for both health and education. Since the start of the collaborative project with the Department of Health, TSH has identified that in most schools up to 75% of children screened in the "at risk" population have significant problems associated with ear health. Poor middle ear health can impact strongly on Aboriginal children and is a significant health barrier to successful schooling. In 2007 the Ear Bus has screened almost 1,000 primary-age Aboriginal students per school term at a variety of metropolitan and South West locations

¹ Berman S. Otitis media in developing countries. Review Article Pediatrics. 1996;96(1): 126-31

PPCN has been operating the Street Doctor Mobile Medical Service since June 2001. The original concept was the brain child of Annette Allman, clinical psychologist and Dr Noel Plumley, from seeing the lack of engagement of mainstream healthcare with homeless people. The multidisciplinary clinical team is comprised of general practitioners (GPs), registered nurses, outreach workers and a health promotion officer. These clinicians are ably supported by managerial and administration staff based at the Perth Primary Care Network (PPCN).

Challenge

No child is cured of middle ear disease by screening. Screening merely indicates the incidence and severity of the problem. This is now well documented for Aboriginal children. In order to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the area of middle ear health, a strategy needs to be implemented to ensure that not only screening takes place to identify children at risk, but also to ensure that these children have access to adequate primary medical care, with referral pathways in place to ENT surgical intervention where necessary.

Collaborative Program to address this challenge

Whilst the screening carried out by TSH effectively indicates the incidence and severity of the problem, to date very few of these children have been able to access medical follow-up. The inclusion of a mobile medical “Ear Doctor” in the Street Doctor service will be exponentially multiply the impact of the Ear Bus program. The Street Doctor bus – renamed the “Ear Doctor” for this program, will simultaneously attend the schools where the TSH Ear Bus is carrying out screening. The Ear Bus will refer children directly to the “Ear Doctor” to receive appropriate treatment for their ear problems from a multidisciplinary team including a GP in a timely manner. Additionally the potential exists for the provision of full medical health checks and if necessary referral to Ear-Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist could be generated. The highly trained team could also liaise with family groups and provide education to the extended family as appropriate.

By way of example, the “Ear Doctor” could provide a combination of the following services:

- Prescription and supply of antibiotics;
- Prescription and supply of analgesics;
- Application and supply of ear drops (e.g. Ciloxan ear drops);
- Ear Toilets;
- Collection of ear swabs for bacteriology; and
- Referral for radiological investigations or ENT specialist treatment.

In addition the “Ear Doctor” would be perfectly poised to address the general health of the target population and where possible provide general practice access to the extended family group. Where-ever possible the children and their families would be referred back to their usual GP’s to receive ongoing care.

Summary

Perth Primary Care Network's (PPCN) Street Doctor mobile medical service, through the new "Ear Doctor" service, is uniquely placed to build on the Telethon Speech & Hearing's (TSH) Ear Bus program, and preliminary discussions have already occurred, and a memorandum of understanding signed between PPCN and TSH to progress this initiative. Through innovative collaboration of the two services a positive outcome can be made in the day to day lives of the young children suffering from ear related and general health problems. PPCN is committed to the provision of best practice treatment to the marginalised and disadvantaged sectors of the population and are proud to collaborate with TSH in such a worthy project.

PPCN has applied for funding from the WA Government's Office of Aboriginal Health to commence the "Ear Doctor" program early in the second school term of 2008. In terms of reference point two, we believe that this is "an appropriate service that addresses the issues identified by an appropriate screening process", and seeks the Committee's endorsement as such.