

Improving Information Technology (IT) Literacy in the Australian Rural Nursing and Midwifery Workforce

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The Learning How to Drive the Internet: Increasing the Level of Computer Literacy in the Rural Nursing and Midwifery Workforce project was conceived by Australian Rural Nurses and Midwives (ARNM), in partnership with Monash University (ARNM, 2008).

In 2008, ARNM successfully applied for a Rural Health Support, Education and Training (RHSET) grant, offered by the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA). Prior to commencement of the project it was transferred to Royal College of Nursing, *Australia* (RCNA), when ARNM merged with Australia's largest nursing professional peak body.

Online learning is an increasingly attractive model for rural nurses and midwives, as many are unable to access geographically distant teaching hubs to participate in face-to-face continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Further, current workforce shortages in the Australian bush compound the difficulties of releasing staff to attend 'off-site' CPD programs.

Geographical isolation, workforce shortages and economic restraints all play a part in increased reliance on electronic communication, which supports both clinical activities and staff development. Therefore, IT competence has become an essential skill for all health service employees, particularly those who work in isolated areas of Australia.

The use of electronic communication can be daunting for members of the ageing workforce. This is of significance in Australia, where the average age of a rural nurse is 46 years (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2008). When the IT training program was first advertised by RCNA there was an immediate and overwhelming response, with 800 nurses and midwives expressing an interest. Of these, the first 150 applicants were selected for the funded positions. The age range of this group reflected the demographic of the Australian nursing and midwifery workforce, with the majority being over 40 years of age (Mills, Francis & Cant, 2009).

The participants worked through the self directed modules, supported by the RCNA Project Officer. Each of the seven modules was allocated RCNA Continuing Nurse Education (CNE) points, with a total of 79 CNE points being awarded for satisfactory completion of all components.

The RHSET grant period concluded in June 2009, with only nine participants completing all modules. Of these, three participants expressed an interest in undertaking the supplementary International Computers Drivers Licence (ICDL) test, with one participant being awarded their ICDL within the funding period.

From July to December 2009, RCNA continued to assist participants, with Monash University also extending its period of involvement, as both organisations remained committed to supporting IT skill acquisition in the rural workforce.

Thereafter, twenty one participants completed all seven modules. Others completed as many as they could, but balancing professional development needs, clinical workloads and rural family life, had proven to be a challenge.