

# Embedding research into the organisational structure of smaller rural hospitals: building research culture and capacity and understanding perceived rural health workforce benefit

## Authors

Laura Alston, Dai Pu, Sarah Wood, Michael Field, Hannah Beks, Olivia A. King, Nikita Wheaton, Catherine E. Huggins, Anna Wong Shee, Kevin McNamara and Vincent L. Versace

## The challenge

Rural hospitals in Australia struggle to attain the same opportunities afforded for research activity, compared to their metropolitan counterparts. Building research capacity and activity in a rural health organisation has potential to play an important role in improving rural health disparities and address workforce retention. There are few examples of organisational-level approaches to develop research culture and capacity in a rural setting. Colac Area Health is one of few rural hospitals with a research unit embedded in the organisational structure. It is not known how the presence of an embedded research unit in a rural hospital is associated with research culture and capacity. This knowledge is important for identifying areas of strength and areas for improvement so that the organisation can continue to support and grow rural health research.

## What we did

In 2023, we conducted a cross-sectional study at Colac Area Health - a small rural hospital that services a region of South-West Victoria in a Modified Monash Model remoteness areas 4–5 in Australia, which are small to medium rural towns with a maximum population of 15,000. The study design utilised the Research Capacity and Culture (RCC) tool in the form of a staff survey that sought to assess the research capacity, capabilities and culture in a small rural hospital with an embedded research unit. A total of 74 anonymous staff surveys were returned, with the data analyzed using various statistical tests to identify associations and correlations against the RCC indicators and engagement with the research unit, and staff job satisfaction.

## What we found

Find out more at [deliver.westernalliance.org.au](https://deliver.westernalliance.org.au)

*The DELIVER research program is supported by a Commonwealth funded MRFF Rapid Applied Research Translation Grant*

- Seventy-four staff members completed the survey, with 15 reporting that they had worked with the research unit. Staff who received support from the Research Unit to undertake research had higher RCC scores for 9 out of 20 organizational-level items.
- Hospital staff rated the benefit of having research opportunities available to them locally as important for their future career prospects (average rating 7 out of 10) .
- Higher RCC scores were positively correlated with higher qualifications and previous research experience. Conversely, lower RCC scores were negatively correlated with older age and more years spent working at the hospital.
- Our study provides new evidence that staff engagement with a locally integrated research unit may be associated with more positive perceptions of research capacity and culture in a rural hospital.
- Of the sample surveyed, almost half reported being in a clinical role, demonstrating the importance of research development to address the key rural health inequalities that clinicians are faced with.
- The availability of evidence to demonstrate clear relationships of positive workforce benefit towards a rural hospital research unit needs further investigation. This is the first study that explored the differences in RCC between staff who have been engaged with an integrated research unit in a rural area.

## What does this mean for rural hospitals, research alliances, regional health networks, and governing bodies?

- Having a research unit integrated into rural health services is not only possible but is also associated with higher positive perceptions of research capacity and culture.
- The rural health workforce in this sample rated the availability of local research opportunities as important for their career development, demonstrating that this requires consideration in workforce planning and retention plans.
- Research alliance and regional network partnerships require concise strategic planning to attract and provide educational support for lesser qualified candidates who have minimal experience in research.

## Reference

Alston, L., Pu, D., Wood, S. et al. Embedding research into the organisational structure of smaller rural hospitals: building research culture and capacity and understanding perceived rural health workforce benefit. BMC Health Services Research, 25:1008, (2025) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-025-13107-8>

---

### The DELIVER Research Project:

- Identifies what the people and healthcare providers of western Victoria need most in terms of home-based healthcare services
  - Designs and tests the best way to deliver these services, so that home-based healthcare services will continue to grow and improve across the region and beyond
  - Supports the growth of research in western Victoria, so that future research findings can quickly be translated to improvements in healthcare
- 

**October 2025**

**Find out more at [deliver.westernalliance.org.au](https://deliver.westernalliance.org.au)**

*The DELIVER research program is supported by a Commonwealth funded MRFF Rapid Applied Research Translation Grant*