KEY MESSAGES

Together for the mental health care of older people (TMOP): Improving the network planning and management of integrated primary mental health care for older people in rural regions

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Policy context

Mental health care for older people is a significant and growing issue in Australia. An older person with a mental health problem may require input from health, aged care and social care services, and so there is a need for a well-networked range of local services, especially in rural locations. We conducted a case study of older people's mental health servicing in a rural region in South Australia, exploring the extent to which services were operating as a network, and the barriers and enablers to networked servicing. The case study examined the effectiveness of facilitated reflection in bringing together services as a network to problem-solve community mental healthcare for older people.

Key messages

We found that services in the region were operating in a range of clustered separate self-managed networks within health, aged and social care sectors, with no overarching formal and purposive network that covered older people's mental health servicing.

Facilitated reflection helped local services to identify as a network and to begin problem-solving interagency communication and referral links. However, with no clear network administration organisation it is unlikely that distributed leadership could continue the process of network reflection.

Our case study suggests that more integrated servicing would benefit from the establishment of a neutral network administration organisation with connections with all sectors (mental health, primary health, aged and social care), with a mandate and resources to monitor the network, foster commitment amongst service managers and provide opportunities for different sectors to meet to address issues and problem-solve. Options are proposed about the network administration organisation being from the new Primary Health Care Networks, State Health or Local Government.

This requires Commonwealth and State policy across the mental health, primary, aged and social care portfolios to include strategies and funding that will to support health and social care organisations to work together as a network.