

KEY MESSAGES

The impact of Equity Focused Health Impact Assessments on local planning for after hours care to better meet the needs of vulnerable populations

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Policy context

Medicare Locals have a strong policy mandate to address issues of access and equity to ensure that their programs reach all members of the community, especially those in greatest need. A key role for Medicare Locals is to develop after hours care plans to ensure that their communities are being provided with appropriate after hours care. However many populations have difficulty in accessing high quality after hours care, including remote and regional communities, Aboriginal and migrant populations, elderly people and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conducting Equity Focused Health Impact Assessments (EFHIA) is one approach to integrating equity and access considerations into local health planning for after hours services. This exploratory study sought to establish whether EFHIA is effective and feasible in local health planning to improve access and equity for vulnerable groups to high quality after hours care; and to establish whether EFHIA is effective in engaging health consumers and vulnerable groups in local health planning.

Key messages

It is more difficult to incorporate considerations of equity and access after plans have already been developed.

Access is a complex issue that means more than the availability of a service but also encompasses awareness of a service, whether it is accessible, affordable, appropriate and acceptable to users. Markers of quality include co-ordinated care, continuity of care and comprehensiveness.

Methodologies to assist Medicare Locals to consider access and equity issues in their planning should be developed, in order to ensure local health service gaps are identified and addressed. This could include a range of approaches and tools such as EFHIA, equity lens or equity audits.

This study suggests that prior to commencing such a process, an initial 'pre-screening' review needs to determine: the plans that are most appropriate to subject to an assessment; whether the Medicare Local is able to commit resources and willing to act on the findings; and the stage of the needs assessment and planning process that will allow most effective input.

Further research is needed to find and evaluate innovative ways to engage communities and other stakeholders in assessing the access and equity implications of Medicare Local plans in the context of many other competing consultations processes.