‘Great Lifestyle, Pity about the Job Stress’: Occupational Stress in Rural Human Service Practice

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Abstract

Social workers, welfare workers and others living and working in small rural communities report that they are generally highly satisfied with their work and lifestyle. Paradoxically, high levels of occupational stress are also reported. Rural welfare work has elements such as the adoption of dual and multiple roles, cultural ‘isolation’, the blurring of work and home, professional and citizenship roles, and lack of anonymity, which can contribute to occupational stress. Concerns about personal and family safety with exposure to episodes of violence, harassment and bullying, within small communities also contribute to feeling stressed.

Using qualitative and quantitative data gained from the authors’ two Australian studies, together with international research, this paper examines rural practice and occupational stress. Whilst employers and colleagues may attribute stress reactions to the individual practitioner’s inability to cope with the demands of rural practice, strategies that are both systemic and structural are required to address this significant occupational issue.

Introduction

This article brings together research findings from two recent Australian studies of the experiences of rural human service workers, which identified occupational stress and strain as key practice and personal issues. Lonne and Cheers (2000, 2001, 2004a, 2004b) completed a longitudinal quantitative and qualitative study that explored these, and other factors related to recruitment and retention of nearly 200 social workers across Australia. Green and Mason conducted a smaller scale, qualitative piece of research about the personal and professional experiences of 23 social and welfare workers in a rural region of Victoria (Green 2003a; Green & Mason 2002; Green, Gregory & Mason 2003). Both studies reported very similar findings related to the lived experiences of rural human service workers, their experience of on-the-job stressors, and their strong commitment to rural practice and living in rural communities.

However, there is an anomaly within these findings: there is a paradox between practitioners’ typically positive statements that the rural lifestyle is great and beneficial for them and their families, and their experiences of significant occupational stress and burnout related to their rural work environments. This paper examines this puzzle and outlines organisational and personal strategies to address problematic areas. Whilst these studies have explored the experiences of social workers and welfare workers, the term ‘rural human service worker’ will be used in this article, as the conditions and experiences of rural work is similar across a range of employment categories in the human service arena (Montgomery 1999).

Stress and Burnout in the Human Services

The Macro Context

Profound economic, political and social change has occurred in Australia and elsewhere during the latter part of the 20th century and into the new millennium. Globalisation of financial and commodity markets, significant technological advances and rapid communication have made the world a starkly different environment in which to live. Many Western governments embraced neo-conservative and neoliberal ideologies that emphasise economic growth above social policy, with concurrent changes to the welfare state (McDonald, Harris & Wintersteen 2003). Some writers have argued that the headlong pursuit of economic efficiency through structural reforms led to a significant weakening in commitment to egalitarian values and an increased acceptance of the social inequality that has emerged (Argy 2004). The role of government in liberal democracies has also altered along with the social mandate for the provision of social and community services. The end result has been an increased emphasis upon individual responsibility rather than broad collectivist responses to community and individual need, thus creating fundamental changes to the ways in which the human services are structured and delivered (see for example: Adams, Dominelli & Payne 2002; Allan, Pease & Briskman 2003; Hil 2001; Hough & Briskman 2003; Hugman 2001; Lymberry 2004; McDonald, Harris & Wintersteen 2003; Mullaly 2001).

As Lonne (2003) has indicated, governments of the Left and Right in many Western countries have promoted policies, including:

- a decreased service delivery role for governments, which have largely adopted a 'purchaser-provider' approach with increased roles for not-for-profit and for-profit service providers;
- greater emphasis on social compliance and social control, resulting in tighter eligibility requirements for service users;
- emphasis on individual and family responsibilities rather than state provided welfare services;
- the predominance of managerialist discourses and practices over professional ethical values and approaches;
- enhanced accountability measures and decreased professional autonomy, often associated with the inherent proceduralism found in case management systems;
- increased flexibility in the range of qualifications deemed suitable for professional human service practice resulting in a convergence of job titles and descriptions; and

- globalisation of trade with resultant economic decline and service rationalisation in some rural communities

Characteristics and Consequences

With this rapid and profound change affecting the organisational and practice environments, it is not surprising that the professional literature began to highlight the negative impacts on professional staff. Increased research focussed on the work stress and burnout experienced, and its effect on staff turnover. Work stress, a 'condition or intermediate arousal state between objective stressors and strain', can result in strain, which is the 'reactions to the conditions of stress' (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2001, p. 15). On the other hand, 'burnout' is a longer term process experienced by workers in people-oriented professions where chronic stressors result in occupational stress that makes them unable to psychologically and emotionally cope with their work (Maslach 1998).

According to Maslach (1998) burnout has three components:

- emotional exhaustion;
- depersonalisation of clients; and
- decreased personal accomplishment.

Social work practitioners generally experience higher stress and lower wellbeing levels than other occupations, although their situation is sometimes overstated and portrayed as endemic. The research overwhelmingly indicates that most practitioners enjoy high job satisfaction levels notwithstanding that they do experience periods of high occupational stress (Lonne 2003).

Research findings of work stress and burnout clearly demonstrate that structural work stressors, rather than personal characteristics, are the most influential factors (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2003). The empirical evidence increasingly shows that a combination of high job demands and low supports is the critical factor in burnout (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2001). Work related factors that contribute to work stress in the social work and human services practitioners, identified by Lonne (2003) include:

- low levels of control and autonomy;
- work role issues including role ambiguity and conflict;
- organisational structures and cultures that disempower staff;
- high workloads;
- practice fields that entail a statutory role such as child protection;
- poor supervision practices and a lack of collegial social support;
- lack of accomplishment and efficacy; and

- violence, conflict and racism within the organisation

In rural areas, these factors are exacerbated by high visibility in the professional and personal spheres, lack of anonymity, managing dual and multiple roles and the complexity of working with individual and families, and the ethical dilemmas which arise within the context of small, communities (Bodor 2004; Lonne & Darracott in press).

Influential personal and non-work factors, which tend to act as moderators rather than sources of work stress and burnout, include:

- workers' resiliency and pre-existing level of psychological well-being;
- an absence of work-home conflict;
- a high degree of personal and professional commitment; and
- access to spousal and other social support.

In rural areas, some workers are geographically distant from their natural support systems, although the typically high levels of personal and professional commitment to rural practice and living evident in our studies may go some way in mitigating the adverse effects of such distance. High work stress and burnout have costly organisational and personal outcomes (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2003). Generally, there is an inverse relationship with job satisfaction, in that highly satisfied workers tend to experience low stress. Furthermore, high levels of job dissatisfaction are associated with high staff turnover. In essence, stressed and burnt out practitioners are usually unhappy and tend to leave their jobs. However, if stressed and dissatisfied workers stay in their jobs, work performance is usually adversely affected and absenteeism can increase. Additionally, disgruntled and stressed staff can contribute to a counterproductive organisational culture with cynicism and dissatisfaction becoming pervasive.

There are also significant personal effects resulting from stress and burnout (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2003; Lonne 2003) including poorer physical health outcomes such as insomnia, exhaustion, stomach problems, dietary complaints, high blood pressure and increased alcohol and drug intake. Adverse psychological effects can include depression, anxiety, cynicism, negativity and feeling alienated.

Stress and Strain for Rural Human Service Workers

Lonne and Cheers Study

Lonne and Cheers' (2000, 2004a) longitudinal study involved surveying 194 Australian rural social workers who had recently commenced their jobs, and again at the two year point or when they left their jobs, whichever came first.

Generally speaking, the professional and administrative supervision these practitioners received was patchy, with employers tending to either provide a range of assistance, including training and financial incentives, or poor support. Many respondents reported high levels of involvement in their communities, local friendships and their professional accomplishments and themselves being positively received and accepted by the community, all of which were related to higher work performance. These factors were positively associated with the high levels of satisfaction with their rural lifestyles experienced by these social workers. Those who had strong commitments to rural practice and living tended to have positive dispositions toward their lifestyles.

One quarter of these practitioners rated themselves as having high levels of emotional exhaustion, which was measured by respondents indicating their level of agreement to a statement about how burned out they were on a visual analogue scale. Furthermore, respondents generally had large amounts of after-hours work and high visibility within their communities, both of which were positively associated with high levels of emotional exhaustion. Other factors associated with increased stress included being young, inexperienced, carrying statutory responsibilities, having work troubles, receiving poor supervision and not being well linked to their communities. Of interest was the finding that the level of emotional exhaustion was inversely related to distance from their supervisor. This indicated that practitioners who were geographically isolated from their supervisors appreciated the autonomy this entailed and experienced lower levels of emotional exhaustion. However, for most, good and supportive supervision was an important buffer to work stress (Lonne & Cheers 2004b).

A sub-sample of 123 respondents who had relocated to take up their position were also surveyed every three months with instruments that measured their process of professional and personal adjustment to rural practice and living. Among other things, their satisfaction with their job, community, and rural lifestyle and their relative levels of stress were measured (Lonne & Cheers 2001). Overall, the results indicated that whilst respondents experienced decreased satisfaction with their rural community over the initial 18 months, those who left their positions early tended to have the biggest decreases. Respondents' 'belongingness to community' steadily increased over time. However, job satisfaction decreased steadily over time, a result consistent with other Australian studies (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 1999). Whilst stress levels were noted to be particularly high immediately following relocation, higher overall levels of stress were reported by those who experienced significant and rapid organisational change, had fewer local friends and decreased access to supervisors.

Change in the adjustment variables was related to similar variables as were associated with practitioners' lengths-of stay. For example, good preparation in professional training, employer-provided supports and incentives, prior rural experience, a positive disposition toward rural living, and community involvement positively affected their adjustment. On the other hand, problematic adjustment was related with factors including high levels of after

hours work and emotional exhaustion, poor administrative supervision, inexperience and having fewer local friendships, all of which were also associated with shorter lengths-of-stay.

The predominant influences on adjustment were employer/positional factors, although some personal characteristics and community variables were also influential. The adjustment process results indicated that stress and satisfaction issues also influenced the staff turnover problems these practitioners experienced, with job satisfaction steadily decreasing while community belongingness did the opposite. This suggests that community factors were unlikely to be a strongly negative influence on length of stay. Rather, employer-related factors, often the same ones that affected job stress, tended to influence whether or not workers left their positions.

Green and Mason Study

This study was conducted in 2000, and examined issues for rural welfare and social workers, living in Western Victoria. It was an exploratory study, and focussed on human service workers in fields of practice identified by the researchers as potentially 'controversial or conflictual'. These fields of practice included those with statutory responsibilities in criminal justice and child protection, and those working where conflict frequently arises, such as working in the fields of sexual assault, family violence and child and family welfare services.

The study was assisted by the formation of a reference group of key staff in major regional organisations and utilized three methods of gathering data: a formal mailed out questionnaire; informal, private, in-depth interviews with a small number of participants; and a series of three publicly advertised forums.

Questionnaires were completed by 23 participants (19 women and 4 men). The participants reflected differing agencies, experience, qualifications and geographic locations. Of these, six participants were selected to further explore the issues and their experiences in private, in-depth interviews, and were chosen to reflect diversity of experience, agency focus, geographic location and size of community and agency.

Following the completion and part analysis of the questionnaires, and interviews, three forums, in different rural centres, were advertised in the print media and by flyers to local agencies. Approximately 40 participants attended the forums. Most of the participants at the forums had not been involved previously in the study and had not completed questionnaires.

Major findings from this study were consistent with the literature, however what struck the researchers was the high level of stress reported, and the extent of the participants' concerns, which centred around the delivery of ethical, just and professional services in the community, and personal and professional safety. They identified conflicts with what was perceived good practice in rural communities and what they had been taught in their

professional training, particularly around issues of dual and multiple roles, confidentiality, and maintenance of professional boundaries. Many had also experienced threats to their personal safety and security at a very high level (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003). Sixteen questionnaire respondents referred to client anger, intimidation and harassment as examples of violence, four had experienced actual physical violence, and three had received threats of violence. Participants talked about the risks involved in sole home visits, transporting clients alone, and using personal vehicles, and also about general activities such as shopping, going to the pub, or to some public social events.

Approximately one-third were concerned about the safety and security of family members, particularly children and adolescents. Many participants seemed hyper vigilant about their children, and had developed deliberate, overt strategies to minimise or prevent occasions where they or their families might be confronted with clients or clients' relatives or friends outside of work situations. Even with these strategies, harassment occurred very frequently for a large percentage of the participants, usually more than monthly. Examples of harassment included verbal abuse, invasion of privacy at social events and in public places, episodes of stalking, and excessive phone contact. Theft of personal belongings, sexual references and unwanted romantic attention had been experienced by some of the participants, as had incidents of clients, or their ex-partners or relatives making malicious complaints and using agency processes to further 'harass' workers. Agency and colleagues' responses to these episodes of violence and harassment varied, while many study participants accepted them as part and parcel of the work in which they were engaged.

Despite the high level of anxiety and stress reported as a consequence of these issues and their work, most reported a very high level of satisfaction with rural community life, and their experience of rural practice. They enjoyed the lifestyle, felt they were making an important contribution to their communities, and were able to work innovatively and creatively at both individual and community levels. Most participants felt valued by their community and their employers, although some reported significant dissatisfaction with work arrangements or their organisation's policy, procedures and support structures. Some reflected that they had little choice if they chose not to relocate to take up a new job, but to stay with their present organisation and 'make the best of it'.

Rural Human Services and Work Stress

Whilst burnout and occupational stress has been reported as high in the human professions (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth 2002), few studies have considered the increased stress arising from work in rural or remote areas. The role of human service workers has become more difficult in the rapidly changing social services area, and in rural areas there are additional professional practice issues (Ginsberg 1998). There has been little by way of urban-rural comparative studies (Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 1999). Recent publications have explored preventable sources of occupational stress for

remote area nurses in Australia (Kelly 2002), but the few social work and welfare publications addressing stress, burnout and vicarious trauma, do so, in more general terms. There seems little doubt that working in the human services in direct practice is inherently stressful. Practice can entail working with intense personal, family and community issues, which is often problem centred, and full of conflict. The distress experienced by professionals working in this field is often underestimated (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth 2002). It is also apparent that such occupational stress is often underreported, treated dismissively by organisations and/or minimised by workers and colleagues as 'just part of the job' (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003; Schanz & Meacham 2003), with individuals being left to respond (Winefield, Dollard & Winefield 2000).

Additional stressors exist for rural human service workers beyond those experienced in large urban centres. The elements that contribute to occupational stress in rural or remote practice are associated with four work-related areas: work role, practice issues, increased visibility (and related safety issues) and organisational context. A fifth area relates to the practical issues of living in rural and remote areas and includes aspects such as increased driving, family issues such as poor access to quality education and other opportunities for family members, and distance from extended family support networks.

Work Role

It has been acknowledged that working in a field such as social work is a 'highly stressful occupation as a result of conflicting roles, status, functions and contexts'... and that this has been exacerbated by 'an increasing emphasis on instrumental outcomes and throughput and decreasing emphasis on the worth of the individual' (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth 2002, p. 256).

These conflicts may be magnified in rural areas as very different expectations can exist within the agency and the community about role and job descriptions, which may also be in conflict with the personal and professional value base of the worker (Lonne & Darracott in press). Human service workers are often on the forefront of community change. Whilst social workers in both metropolitan and rural areas challenge community norms, in rural locations such activities can be particularly difficult. For example, practising in fields such as family violence and child protection, being involved in contentious work-related litigation, advocating for gay and lesbian rights, and combating racism, can place the human service worker in a difficult position, where harassment and work related violence is highly personalised (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003).

Human services work in rural areas requires an enhanced ability to deal with complex and difficult situations, and to be innovative, creative, self directed and reflective (Cheers 1998; Lonne & Darracott in press). Rural human service workers need to be 'generalists' and have to be able to manage a wide range of fields of practice and generic intervention methods (Lonne & Cheers 2000, 2004a&b). The worker must be able to 'rise to the occasion' as

there are limited resources and capacity to refer. With fewer specialist services available, practitioners in rural areas must be able to work in a wide range of contexts and develop capacity to work effectively across a range of fields. This should not necessarily be viewed negatively, as in these two studies, many participants commented on the positives associated with the flexibility of their work, and their delight in being able to creatively respond to local issues. Many valued the opportunities to develop and learn new skills and knowledge. Rural human service workers are also in a unique position to contribute to, and advocate for, their rural communities (Alston 2002). Taking leadership roles is often an expected part of rural practice, and rural practitioners often take on community development roles and play key roles as 'social innovators' within the community (Munn & Munn 2003).

Whilst providing personal satisfaction, such practice roles encounter tensions: between the ideals and visions; managing within the reality of governmental and organisational constraints; pressures to concentrate on individual outcomes rather than community development; and lack of commitment by governments to developing workable policy frameworks for rural communities (Cheers & Taylor 2002). There are also tensions and conflicts in working within small communities with dense networks. There may also be conflicts about future directions for towns under threat, and differences of expectation related to the role of the human service worker. While many participants in these two studies were managing such tensions effectively, some reported great distress and concern about the quality of their practice, whether they were practising appropriately and professionally, and were worried about accountability and duty of care issues related to their community, their employing agency and their clients (Green 2003a).

Practice Issues

A second key area, which is a source of stress for rural human service workers, relates to practice issues when the worker is part of the community in which they live. Once again, this source of stress was experienced differently by different participants, although most participants in these studies commented upon the immense satisfaction arising from being part of, and contributing to, their community (Lonne & Cheers 2004b). They particularly commented on the benefits of a rural lifestyle, including engagement with the community, it being a great place for family, recreational pursuits, and social cohesion. However, they also commented on the professional stress that occurs with trying to manage their practice within prescribed, and what are often perceived to be rigid, ethical and professional expectations.

Participants in both studies raised three main concerns: managing confidentiality, conflicting duties of care, and juggling dual and multiple role boundaries, including professional/personal role overlap. Whilst enjoying 'making a difference' in small communities, participants expressed concern about whether they were adhering to the guidelines and professional expectations that had been conveyed to them during their professional education, and some had significant emotional reactions to their perceived difference between professional expectations and their own practice reality.

Unfortunately, there seems little emphasis on formal preparation or support in pre-service undergraduate courses in Australian social work or welfare courses about these significant day to day issues of rural practice and how best to deal with them (Green 2003b).

A central issue appeared to be the difficulty in managing confidentiality and privacy in small settings, and the high visibility for clients, the human service worker, and the agency. Many practitioners were concerned about how to offer a service that protects privacy, and managing private and public knowledge about events and clients' circumstances. Meeting clients in public places (and their partners, ex-partners and other interested parties), and being given information outside of formal channels was a frequent occurrence. Managing this information, and deciding when, and if, to give it credence or credibility, created some dilemmas for some workers in small communities (Green & Mason 2002).

This aspect of personal/public knowledge became apparent particularly in reference to knowledge of perpetrators of violent acts within the community, although some participants also referred to knowledge of attempted suicide, addictions, and interfamily conflict. For the rural human service workers in these studies, significant personal and professional conflict occurred when a worker had knowledge relative to an individual, for example, about violence, particularly child abuse and paedophilia, and yet had to remain silent in the community. Fears of the damage that this individual may do, and reprisals if the community knows that the professional withheld this knowledge, caused some stress. Some participants worried about how to warn their own children, and friends about potential risks from violent members of the community, when this violence was known by them through their professional capacity (Green 2003a; Green & Mason 2002). Lloyd, King & Chenoweth (2002) identified this stress as part of a conflict of ethics and values, but do not specifically address its effects in rural areas, where the relationship between professional and personal roles is particularly complex.

Perhaps new models, which move away from the traditionally conceptualised, individualistic focus of the client/ worker paradigm, need to be more clearly articulated for rural practice. There has been interest in changing the prescriptive nature of the 'confessional' approach to counselling models to a new approach where the personal and professional roles are in synchrony, and where community integration of the professional is taken seriously (Cheers 1998; Crago, Sturmey & Monson 1996; Green & Mason 2002; Lynn et al. 1998).

Relationships that extend to include dual and multiple roles, and unclear role boundaries, are generally discouraged and problematised in the professional literature, and this creates conflict for workers educated in such approaches when confronted with the reality and necessities of rural practice (Bodor 2004). Seeing clients as important members of one's community can be liberating and provide fulfilment, and still fit within ethical approaches. It can also contribute to the development of innovative responses to practice issues

because it enables the practitioner to be connected with others and to seek their assistance in the discovery of fresh approaches to address problems. Radical and feminist practice models demonstrate ways in which to work in partnerships rather than in a 'objective, professional expert' model. These models also have relevance to rural practice.

Increased Visibility

Vicarious trauma, often called compassion fatigue, has also been noted as a possible result of working in some fields of social welfare (Cunningham 2003; Lonne 2003), and in rural areas such trauma can occur, not just from working with people who have experienced violence and distress, but from working and living in the same vicinity. In small communities, rapes and assaults, injuries and deaths are experienced not just as a professional working with the victims and survivors, and possibility perpetrators, but by knowing in a personal and immediate way of the effect on families and the community. The workers' own family is also not immune (Kelly 1998).

In rural areas, reprisals, harassment and violence against workers appear to be higher than in urban areas, and is a consequence of increased visibility and lack of anonymity. In a recent comparative study examining client initiated violence in rural and urban mental health settings, it was found that in rural areas 'practitioners report higher percentages of knowledge of, experience with, and concern about client initiated violence than their urban counterparts' (Schanz & Meacham 2003 p. 54). They also found that there was less reporting of threatening working conditions in rural areas. Visibility and lack of anonymity in rural areas is of concern to some workers and contributes to client initiated harassment and violence because workers can be easily identified and approached (Green, Gregory & Mason 2003).

Many of the participants in the Green and Mason study found increased satisfaction by being recognised as a significant and helpful person in the community, and that this compensated for after-hours intrusions. However, almost all the rural workers participating in this study had significantly modified their lifestyles to prevent unwanted client contact: for example they did not socialise in public places, chose carefully where and when to shop, and were circumspect with what personal and family information they divulged within the community. Many were very concerned about their personal and family safety and had taken steps to prepare family members for unwelcome calls or contacts. Rural welfare workers with young children or adolescents in their care appeared to be hyper-vigilant about their safety. Many rated highly on scales indicating stress and strain in relation to their perceptions of safety, and this was related to their level of comfort with their personal visibility.

Organisational Factors

Finally, in relation to work factors, organisational culture and conditions appear to be major contributors to the question of whether or not workers experience extremely high levels of stress. Changes to the role and status

of the professions, and the application of economic rationalism and its resultant managerialism and centralist approach have meant that local rural professionals 'have lost some of their professional decision-making autonomy' (Munn & Munn 2003 p. 23).

For many lone workers, supervision is provided at a distance, and/or by 'content free' managers without professional qualifications or experience in social welfare or human service practice. Supervision is seen as critical for all workers, but particularly for those who are isolated or in lone positions, but such supervision should be supportive, and facilitate understanding of the rural issues confronting the worker (Lonne & Cheers 2004a). Often supervision is from a central office, away from the rural setting and is not seen as particularly helpful (Munn & Munn 2003). We argue that support from colleagues is also important in managing day-to day occupational stressors.

In the two studies reported here, it was apparent that some organisations had good practices in place for supporting employees, and provided a positive organisational culture. These practices and policies included clarification and validation of roles, awareness and support for managing blurred roles, and formalised methods of dealing with harassment and violence directed towards staff. Some had clear public statements about harassment being unacceptable, and well developed protocols. However, many participants reported that their organisations showed little regard in practice for them or their roles (demonstrated by a lack of equipment, office space, protocols, replacement when on leave, debriefing opportunities etc). Some had privately arranged and paid for professional supervision, as the supervision provided by their agency was inadequate. It is clear that organisational factors are significant in ameliorating or exacerbating occupational stress (see also Dollard, Winefield & Winefield 2001, 2003; Lonne 2003), and that the rural organisations in both studies varied in their concern and capacity to manage these issues.

Other Factors

A significant stress mediator is family and personal support systems. In rural areas, workers may be at some distance from natural support networks. Family factors such as distance from significant support networks, absence of a partner, or difficulties within the family can add to stress levels. In addition, rural workers have fewer job options, and if a partner must relocate it is not unusual for a town to lose two of its professionals. In addition, as children reach late adolescence, professionals in rural practice must make decisions based on their children's schooling and other opportunities. These other factors create stress for rural families, and often have resulting impacts on the agency in which they work, and the community in which they live.

The Paradox

What is apparent from these studies is that a paradox exists between high stress levels and job satisfaction. Generally speaking, the literature identifies high stress as usually being related with low job satisfaction, but in rural areas

high stress and high job satisfaction can co-exist. The stress appears mostly to be concerned with work roles and practice issues, worker safety and security and organisational structures. The satisfaction is also related to work roles and practice, role validation (either internally or externally), and 'making a difference' in the community. Some organisations had developed formal and informal mechanisms to support staff, provide debriefing and supervision opportunities, recognising the complexities of practice, and thus assisting in ameliorating stressors. But others devalued staff and provided workplaces which did not foster a culture of support. It would normally be expected that low job satisfaction and high work stress would be significant components in decreasing lifestyle satisfaction. However, for rural human service workers other factors seem to be at play. For many of them, high job satisfaction exists together with high work stress and high satisfaction with the lifestyle. Although organisational factors appeared critical in the studies, many of those participating also commented on other factors that mitigated stress. These included their 'professional maturity', that is, the degree of comfort they had in their professional capabilities, the 'trade-offs' which their working life allowed (able to see kids at sports day, enjoyment of recreational and other rural pursuits) and the flexibility and opportunities it offered personally and in their professional capacity. To better manage occupational stress, organisational responses and personal ones are required, yet the outcomes of both studies indicate a 'patchy' organisational response to such issues in rural human service organisations, with many practitioners left to their own devices. We would encourage organisations, professional associations, and individual workers to take action to ensure organisations have, at a minimum:

- clear policies and protocols for managing threats to safety, harassment and violence, and which reinforce organisational expectations of behaviours of colleagues, clients and associated people;
- regular provision of supportive professional supervision, and access to debriefing with people familiar with rural practice issues;
- regular forums to discuss issues/concerns/strategies related to working in complex, small communities;
- policies and funding to provide support and training for rural practitioners; and
- a way to highlight these concerns and issues to professional educators, as most participants in the studies felt poorly prepared for rural practice through their pre-service education and training.

Of concern to us was the way the participants, and their colleagues, worked to minimise the extent of the risks when confronted with ongoing harassment and threats. This environment can have long-term emotional risks, and the actual risk of physical attack may also be treated dismissively. Our recommendations to practitioners are;

- treat threats seriously and make realistic risk assessments;

- support colleagues and create a mutually supportive environment where such matters are openly discussed;
- use one's community profile and connections to develop a range of local supports, including police and other measures for protection and safety;
- employ a range of personal and organisational stress relieving activities; and
- recognise and affirm that threatening and harassing behaviour is unacceptable, and take appropriate action to deal with it through their agency and other channels.

The paradox outlined here is not yet fully explained, however it seems that high levels of stress do not necessarily equate with low job satisfaction in rural areas, and that connection with community plays a part. Lifestyle satisfaction, high job satisfaction and high stress levels can co-exist for rural human service workers. Further research in this area may shed light on why this is so, and explain the part that high satisfaction with their rural community and lifestyle have in moderating occupational stress. It occurs to us that recognising the special circumstances and the effects that the advantages and disadvantages of rural practice have on practitioners and their families is an important first step in formulating responses to their very real safety and stress issues. However, the findings of these studies emphasise that employers have a critical role in reducing problematic occupational stress by addressing the organisational factors that contribute to its onset, management and reduction.

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