OPTIMIZING RURAL HEALTH CARE THROUGH IMPROVED TEAM FUNCTION:

A CASE STUDY OF THE RURAL SURGICAL OBSTETRICAL NETWORKS PROGRAM

MAIN TAKEWAYS

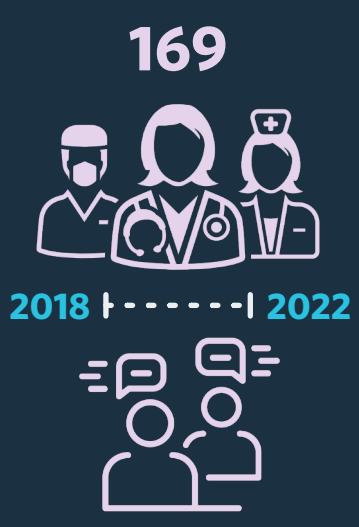
The RSON interventions, namely clinical coaching and local support for continuous quality improvement (CQI) initiatives, enabled across geographic distance through remote presence technology, converged to support the growth and function of teams at a local level.

Almost all participants noted the importance of a local leader in the success of RSON at their site. There has been a historical lack of compensation for contributions to teamwork which has been interpreted as lack of value for these activities.

The enabling structures described by participants in this study lead to site-level transformation, most notably a reduction in stress and increase in confidence.

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES:

Very little is known about enablers and mechanisms of good team function and their relationship to clinical outcomes in rural British Columbia (BC). The current study provides a first step to address this gap. The qualitative data gathered describes rural health care teams' experiences of participating in a program in BC that provided resources to strengthen team function.

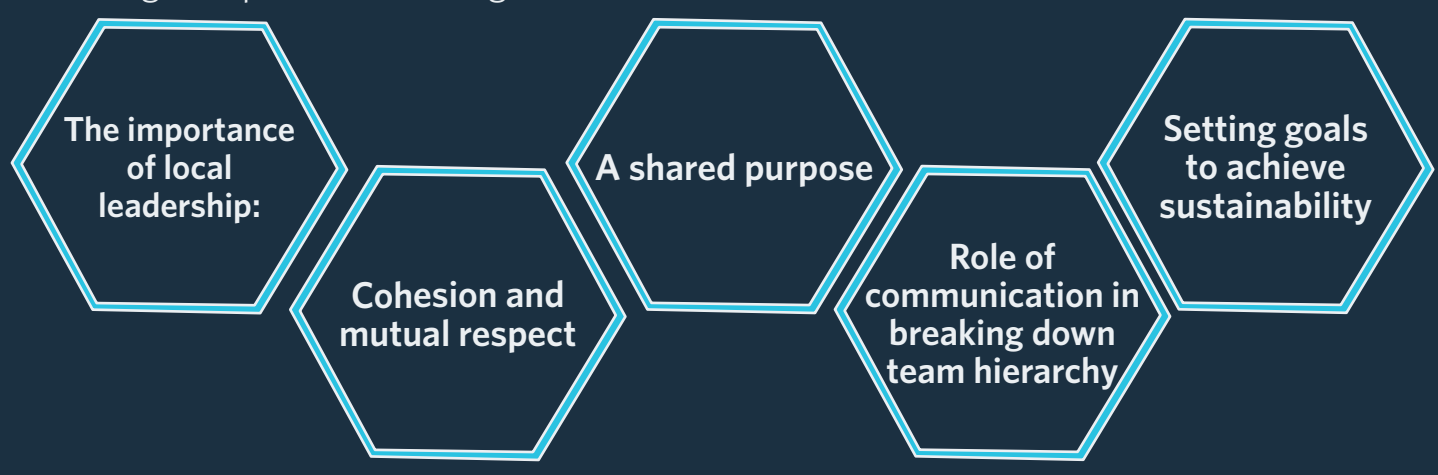


METHODS:

Data for this study was drawn from 169 health care providers and administrators who participated in the Rural Surgical Obstetrical Networks (RSON) initiative to support low volume rural surgical and obstetrical services in British Columbia, Canada. Our team conducted yearly semi-structured interviews across 8 sites between 2018-2022. Inductive thematic analysis of interview data was conducted. The five-year program provided resources for evidence-based system interventions across ten rural sites with the objective of providing sustainable quality health services to meet population needs.

RESULTS:

The findings are presented through these 5 characteristics:



Results aligned with core attributes of Mickan and Rodger's model of optimal team function, including the alignment of teamwork with the organizational mission to provide high-quality health care and developing effective team structures and processes to carry out tasks, alongside creating an environment attuned to supporting individual contributions.

DISCUSSION:

Implementation of the Rural Surgical and Obstetrical Networks project led to a shift in team culture in participating sites which resulted in improved team function. This ultimately contributed to improved clinical processes and improved patient outcomes. An overarching recommendation is to ensure adequate support and funding to develop highly functional teams, based on the recognition of its importance in optimizing not only the experience of care providers, but patient safety and quality care. This can be done by:

1. Co-creating goals for team culture with participation of all team members, including metrics that can be observed to ensure goals are being met;
2. Ensure resources are available (existing or new) to support necessary skills development of team members including but not limited to leadership development, communication, problem solving and conflict resolution;
3. Ensure clarity of members' roles on health care teams;
4. Consider inclusion of allied professionals outside of the core team who may contribute to patient care.