MacHSR Future Leaders Fellowship program: Final report

Name: Dr Karen McLean

Project title: Improving Pathway to Good Health clinical practices through clinician and consumer perspectives.

Background: original problem and approach

Children and young people involved in out-of-home care ("care") are a patient population living with the most adverse experiences of any at the Royal Children's Hospital (RCH). Since 2013, the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) has provided over five hundred multi-disciplinary assessments of health needs for children who have entered care through the Pathway to Good Health (PTGH) clinics. Following years of advocacy based on my doctoral research, a state-wide rollout of PTGH clinics and health navigators was implemented across 2024-2026. CCCH is now funded to deliver two PTGH clinics and provide state-wide clinical leadership for PTGH through the Victorian Centre of Health Leadership for Children in Care (VCHLCC).

This MacHSR fellowship project initially aimed to evaluate current practices within the RCH PTGH clinic and co-design improvements to provide high quality, trauma-informed health assessments that meet the needs of children, families and carers, clinicians and Child Protection services.

Refinements to the project

In conversations with the project mentors (Prof Hiscock, Prof Temple-Smith and Ms Hartland), we identified that to evaluate the current practices within the RCH PTGH clinic it was necessary to understand what constitutes best practice for comprehensive multi-disciplinary health needs assessments at entry to care. The existing national guidance document (the National Clinical Assessment Framework) has not been updated since 2011. I therefore focused my fellowship year on exploring the definition of best practice to support future quality improvement work within our clinic and across Victoria.

Activities

1. Review of national and international guidelines for health assessments at entry to out-of-home care

Through internet searching and liaison with clinicians in other jurisdictions, Iidentified relevant documents – guidelines, policy/procedure advice, and tools for clinicians – that support health assessment for children and young people entering statutory care. In addition to the *National Clinical Assessment Framework,* Australian documents included State/Territory standards, procedures/clinical tools or frameworks (Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia, Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland), one local government document (Gold Coast), and one professional body position statement (*Royal Australasian College of Physicians).* National standards were also identified for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand, alongside a tool for clinicians in the United Kingdom, and professional body position statements in Canada and the United States. These were reviewed to understand the recommendations regarding when, by whom, where and how assessments are undertaken, alongside 'what' should be assessed.

2. Qualitative study of healthcare workers and carers to identify understand carer and healthcare worker perspectives regarding best practice for comprehensive multidisciplinary health assessments for children entering out-of-home care.

Eight (out of 17 eligible) foster and kinship carers took part in interview, and 26 (out of 65 eligible) healthcare workers took part in one of five focus groups. Transcripts were analysed to understand what was important to

carers and healthcare workers about when, by whom, where and how assessments are undertaken, alongside 'what' should be assessed. I engaged a research assistant with qualitative research experience who assisted with conducting interviews, focus groups and coding/analysing the data to identify themes.

Barriers and delays

The project setup took longer than hoped - funding needed to be secured for the qualitative study before it could be submitted to ethics, to ensure appropriate compensation for carers and payment of transcription costs of sensitive data. For methodological rigor, the data analysis has required the input of a second researcher and timelines have thus been slowed somewhat by her availability.

Achievements and impacts

- Funding secured to support the qualitative research from the Royal Australasian College of Physicians – Paediatric Small Study Grant ($6000)
- Funding secured from the RCH Foundation to conduct quality improvement (QI) in PTGH clinics in 2026-27 as part of a grant for QI & evaluation work within the VCHLCC ($255,000).

Translation of research

Findings from the qualitative study will be disseminated through:

- An abstract has been submitted to ISPCAN 2026 (the annual international conference for the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect);
- An abstract will be submitted to the Australasian Society of Developmental Paediatricians conference
- A manuscript is under development for publication in a peer-reviewed journal
- A webinar with the Pathway to Good Health clinicians across Victoria (via VCHLCC)
- Presentation to the clinicians within the Centre for Community Child Health, to explore what evaluation and QI activities could take place in other clinics within the department.

Plans for continued activity

In 2026-27, under the RCH Foundation grant, QI work will take place within the PTGH clinic at RCH. Some early work is underway, with a revision of patient/carer-facing materials being drafted, as this was the most pressing area needing improvement as per the interviews with carers.

The audit tool will be developed with the QI team and trialled in Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles within the RCH PTGH clinics. Once this tool has been refined, it will then be disseminated to all the sites within Victoria. We will consider whether publication for more widespread use is possible.

Resulting collaboration

The introduction to other health services researchers has led to a collaboration with Dr Elyssia Bourke, one of other cohort 3 MacHSR Future Fellow participants for a childhood mental health grant (MRFF) application in 2026.

Government engagement

Through the VCHLCC there has been ongoing engagement with the Department of Health (Victoria) for some time, and they have been aware of the MacHSR Fellowship project. The current funding for PTGH clinics and VCHLCC runs out on June 30, 2027, and the Department is undertaking a lapsed funding evaluation for the Department of Treasury and Finance, while beginning to prepare the budget bid for ongoing funding in the May 2027 State budget.

The team within the Department are very interested in the findings from the qualitative research, due to their own challenges hearing from carers in the Department-led evaluation. There will therefore be ongoing engagement with them about the research findings as they are finalised, including presentation of findings pertinent to their evaluation.