

Designing a regional approach to chemotherapy services

By Thick

For Grampians Integrated Cancer Services, Ballarat, Victoria

Overview

Background

Most people know someone who has suffered from cancer. Treatment can be painful and traumatic and there is always the risk that it won't be enough. It is a time of great stress as people attempt to maintain their personal and work lives, make big decisions about their health and manage the stress of the situation. For cancer patients in rural areas, distance adds to the burden as it means they must travel to receive treatment; services can be as far away as five or six hours drive from home.

Chemotherapy outreach services have been under a lot of pressure in the Grampians region. The majority of chemotherapy services have been provided by a single clinician, who has a high caseload and must routinely travel long distances to see patients.

With only one service available, and cancer rates in the region increasing, patients from the region have been forced to travel an additional three or more additional hours Melbourne to receive care. Others have opted for more radical treatments, such as surgery, to avoid travelling further from home.

For the Grampians region, the situation had reached a breaking point. Patients were suffering and there was considerable risk in the chemotherapy outreach system – if the current clinician became ill, the region would be entirely without a chemotherapy provider.

In the past, the region had tried to overcome the challenge by recruiting specialist clinicians to the area, but this has repeatedly proven a temporary solution, as doctors have opted to return to the city or move to another area. A more stable and permanent solution was a significant concern for the region, but no one organisation could pull it off by themselves.

Objectives

We were engaged by the Grampians Integrated Cancer Services, in partnership with health strategy consultants from Foresight Lane, to design and facilitate a collaborative design forum.

The aim of this forum was to enable the region's public and private hospitals, the Department of Health, the Grampians Medicare local, as well as individual medical practitioners, to come together and design a new chemotherapy outreach model for the region.

Together, providers needed to find a solution that would complement their existing chemotherapy service offering and scale to meet growing demand. Stakeholders knew a new model was desperately needed, but there was no shared view on how to overcome a range of commercial, political and resource constraints.

The best case scenario was that public and private providers could work together, distributing capability across the region, while satisfying both government funding requirements and commercial interests.

The goal of the project was to design a new model, an aim that required collaboration across organisational boundaries within a complex context. This is where our expertise came in.

Process

Approach

We brought stakeholders together at an offsite venue – the local golf club – and facilitated a collaborative process. Equipped with a series of tools and frameworks that broke the challenge down into smaller pieces, the participants were able to work through the different considerations and prototype a new operational and service model.

As we were bringing together a group of stakeholders (who are historically commercial competitors) it was critical that the whole group could protect their personal interests. Not only that, but it was important the group could align around a common, system-wide solution to getting cancer patients in the region the services they needed.

Method

We approached the challenge by bringing together an executive group of 'event sponsors' for a series of meetings to plan a two-day design forum. These sponsors were leaders with the ability to represent the interests of their organisation and its role in the solution.

Over a period of six weeks, we designed all aspects of the event. We selected participants who could bring the knowledge that would be needed, defined the program of activities, designed the activities, developed a knowledge management process and facilitation approach, and made decisions about the participant experience and the environment for them to work in.

This process was completed in collaboration with the sponsor group, who were able to clarify their collective goal through the process of designing the event. The conversations held prior to the event meant that the sponsors were able to prepare themselves and their organisations for the design forum. They also provided us with the information we needed to design the activities and pitch them at the right level for participants.

Outcomes

Over the course of the two-day event, participants worked through their collective health service capabilities and built a deep understanding of the growing demand for chemotherapy within the community.

By the end, service providers had sketched the components of a universally viable chemotherapy service model, one that addressed both public and private interests, including a funding and workforce model.

After the event, Thick produced the new integrated model of care, workforce model and funding model that was designed by the group. We then sent polished deliverables back to the network as vision artefacts.

Together, we designed the first regional, integrated approach to chemotherapy services in Victoria.

Implementation

Participants in the event were able to take the artefacts and outcomes from the event back to their 'home' organisations. Agreements were formalised and the new service was launched within months of the event.

The benefits of design

Collaboration can be a challenge within an organisation, let alone across organisational boundaries. The benefit of our design process was that it brought together the diverse stakeholder group with a firmly established shared goal and systematically worked through each consideration the model needed to take into account.

The process and facilitation enabled participants to work together and build trust, share goals and reach a successful outcome, quickly and efficiently.

The sponsor meetings and design forum enabled participants to convene around a compelling shared goal: the wellbeing of cancer patients. The limitations each organisation faced in meeting the needs of this group individually were resolved by approaching the problem collectively.

This collective approach to problem solving was made possible by identifying all of the relevant requirements and constraints together and then designing a model that would satisfy them. Ordinarily, these obstacles might present as insurmountable barriers, but through a collaborative design process they were rapidly and creatively resolved.

The design process also added a level of clarity, which meant that participants walked away with more than a verbal agreement, but with sketches of the business case, operational and customer models required to support a new service. The artefacts we delivered were used by stakeholders to establish a business case and communicate it back to their organisations.

Effect

After the forum stakeholders designed, launched and received approval for a new, collaboratively delivered chemotherapy service. The way this service works, from a patient and a practitioner point of view, is directly modelled on the outputs created during the event.

On its first day of operation, the new chemotherapy clinic was fully booked. The pressure has been relieved from the single service provider and the region is now equipped to meet current and future demand.

The design of the new model translated to the delivery of the service. By putting the user at the centre of the design process, the patient is the undisputed focus of the service. This means that the coordination of services for that patient happen more seamlessly behind the scenes and cancer patients can focus on recovery.

The attention drawn to the need for chemotherapy services has lead to further investment in improving this service for the region. Participants in the event went on to raise \$500,000 worth of community funds for a new chemotherapy facility. An additional \$1 million was contributed by the federal government, with the Prime Minister visiting Horsham to make the announcement.