



A birthday check-up

When Tashe Long became a facilitator for the department's Schools as Community Centres program, one of her first jobs was to identify issues affecting local children.

Through feedback from principals and community members, it quickly became clear that a lack of formal health screenings before children began school was impacting on their learning.

"Some of the kids hadn't been checked for vision or hearing problems. The teachers were concerned that maybe there were behavioural problems with some children because they couldn't hear properly or see the blackboard properly," said Ms Long, who works with schools from Bodalla to Bermagui in the Illawarra and South East region.

From this diagnosis Ms Long came up with an ingenious proposal that children – from newborns up to the age of eight – be given a thorough medical examination by a local GP each year on their birthday, with the consultation bulkbilled to ease the financial burden on parents.

It was a remedy that quickly gained the local medical community's support.

"Once I had one doctor on board I was able to approach the rest. It was a bit of a chain reaction," Ms Long said.

There are now 12 GPs involved in the program, providing check-ups to children from Narooma, Central Tilba and Bodalla public schools.

Marilyn Gibson, Narooma Public School principal, said since the program started just over a year ago there had been a reduced need for teachers to identify students' health issues once they started school.

"What we're finding is that when children come into school many of the support issues have already been identified and children and families are already linked to services," she said.

Mrs Gibson said she was able to direct parents to the program when they came for the initial school enrolment interview and families felt supported by the school and the government agencies.

"Often I can see the child might have behavioural issues, social issues or learning issues. I will recommend to the parents that they contact their GP and book their child in for a Birthday Medicals appointment. I know anecdotally that it's been very effective."

Mrs Gibson said the transition to school for Kindergarten students was smoother and teachers were better prepared for those children who arrived at school with early intervention needs.

"We [already] know that these children are going to have support requirements and we can be proactive," she said.

Dr Jenny Wray, of Light-house Surgery in Narooma, said the program had an important role to play in addressing long-term health issues such as childhood obesity.

"It's a really wonderful thing to be able to detect obesity early and get the kids on a better eating and exercise program," she said.

Dr Wray said the South East NSW Division of General Practice was expanding the service from Ulladulla to the Victorian border for children up to 18 years under the Healthy for Life program.

Kim Cotton

Photo: David Lefcovitch