

## Not just dogs, dumps and dustbins! How collaboration between local government and health educators can benefit the rural community

Julie Forgan<sup>1</sup>, Barbara Linden<sup>2</sup>, Jacqueline Michalski<sup>1</sup>, Jim Maher<sup>2</sup>, Lyn Gum<sup>1</sup>, Chris Nobes<sup>1</sup>, Janet Richards<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Flinders University Rural Clinical School, <sup>2</sup>City of Mount Gambier LGA

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Julie Forgan is the Medical and Health Education Program Administrator at Flinders University Rural Clinical School, Mount Gambier, South Australia. She has been involved in the Junior Doctor program supporting education of prevocational doctors since December 2006. In late 2009 she commenced administering the IMMERSe (Integrated Multidisciplinary Model for Education in Rural Settings)pilot program where health science students move to the region on longitudinal placements and learn in interprofessional groups. Julie's qualifications include a Bachelor of Economics, Graduate Certificate in Public Sector Management and Graduate Certificate in Clinical Education. She has a broad and extensive background in administration, having worked in both the health industry (South East Regional Health Service and Limestone Coast Division of General Practice),and in the education sector (TAFESA and Deakin University) whilst a local resident. Julie also has ten years experience in administrative review in social welfare and mental health sectors.

Barbara Linden is the Media and Communications Officer at the City of Mount Gambier in regional South Australia. She is responsible for promoting the strategic vision—LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE—for the City of Mount Gambier and is the sole administrator of the City's Lifelong Learning Working Party which is delivering on its mandate to establish the City of Mount Gambier as a Lifelong Learning community. On behalf of the City Council Barbara has fostered effective relationships with the tertiary health educators in Mount Gambier and provided financial, professional and social support to both the educators and the students to enable effective integration within the community. Barbara has a diverse background in administration, allied health, training and regional community development having worked closely with communities throughout the Limestone Coast and the City of Mount Gambier with a particular focus on attraction and retention issues that affect future population growth, which include the expansion of locally delivered Tertiary education programs and health services.

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This multimedia presentation uses PowerPoint and video footage to showcase the benefits to medical education, the rural workforce and health in local communities through the collaboration between the City of Mount Gambier Council and the Flinders University Rural Clinical School in Mount Gambier, South Australia. In particular it covers two new program initiatives 'LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE' and 'IMMERSe'—an Integrated Multidisciplinary Model for Education in Rural Settings.

### Background

Mount Gambier is the regional centre (population approx 25,000) in Limestone Coast region (population 64,832) located in the south east corner of South Australia(1). It lies midway between Melbourne and Adelaide. Mount Gambier comprises the Local Government areas of City of Mount Gambier, as well as Grant District Council for the immediate surrounding communities. The local tertiary facilities who provide education for the health workforce include TAFE SA, UNISA (nursing and social work), and Flinders University (medicine and allied health).

Major industries include agriculture, forestry and fishing, manufacturing, Retail Trade, Health and Community Services and Education. A recent Limestone Coast Workforce report noted that there has been strong growth in the Health and Community Service and Education sectors in the region over the last ten years and that continued growth was expected(2). However there is a need to encourage young people to work in these industries due to the ageing of the existing workforce.

The Department of Health and Ageing Audit of Health Workforce in 2007 found that people living in regional and remote Australia have less access to allied health professionals than those living in major cities(3). The diversity of professions but lower staffing equivalents needed for the populations, often make it difficult to recruit and retain health professionals, a situation not helped by the expense involved in relocating to more remote areas.

Earlier medical workforce research on the association between rural background and where SA general practitioners work indicated that rural background is an important influence on the choice of rural practice, also measures such as primary and secondary education in the country and having a partner in the country

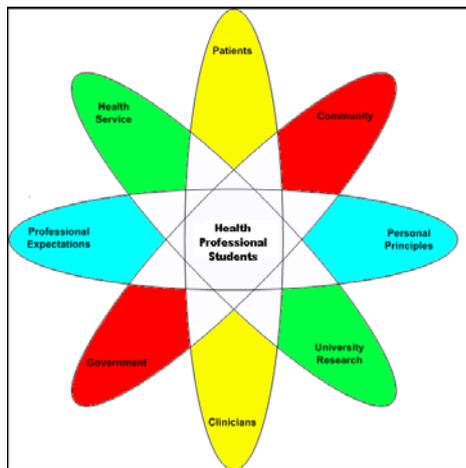
were even more strongly associated with rural practice(4). Policy implications include encouraging medical schools to increase rural student admissions, providing scholarships to support students, ensuring quality education available (primary, secondary and tertiary) in the country and careers and support for partners.

Both Mount Gambier City Council and the Flinders University Rural Clinical School have developed strategies to benefit the local health workforce. By collaborating, mutual health goals can be achieved for the community.

### Flinders University Rural Clinical School

In 2002, Flinders University established a Rural Clinical School (FURCS) in Mount Gambier, which provided third year medical students with a longitudinal rural experience using an integrated curriculum parallel to the one in metropolitan Adelaide, but also provided authentic clinical learning opportunities mainly in the primary health care setting in general practice. The Parallel Rural Community Curriculum (PRCC) was initially established in the Riverland of SA in 1997 by Dr Paul Worley, now the Dean, School of Medicine, Flinders University. Dr Worley expounded a model of community based medical education where symbiotic relationships were the feature(5). The model is student centred, but links into relationships between patients/clinicians, health services/ university research, professional expectations/personal principles, and community/ government.

The relationship of the student in context of the community and government considers the importance of community engagement and embeddedness concepts particularly relevant to local council and FURCS working together to achieve health benefits for rural communities.



#### The Integrity model: the 4 R's. Source: Worley (2002)

Further analysis of community and tertiary based medical education programs found that community based students developed a better appreciation of the wider needs of the community through continuity of care and community rapport(6). Having a welcoming community, seeing their patients as part of that community outside their hospital stay, and being valued as a future workforce by both the community and government were seen as positive incentives by the locally based students.

Furthermore, the PRCC program in South Australia has seen higher academic outcomes in its rurally based students compared with their metropolitan counterparts(7), and 54% of PRCC graduates are reported to be on a rural career pathway(8).

To strengthen the local medical education pathways, the Mount Gambier intern program was established in 2007 through collaboration of FURCS and the South East Regional Health Service (now part of Country Health SA). This program forms a conduit between student and general practice training opportunities in the Limestone Coast.

The success of the PRCC model has been the impetus to commence an IMMERSe program in 2010 for allied health students following similar longitudinal based community education principles.

## Mount Gambier City Council

In the Mount Gambier City Council's 2007-2015 Strategic Plan, Health and Learning are two key strategic goals toward which council are now moving strongly with articulated vision and strong community support(9).

### Health

The City of Mount Gambier, on behalf of the community, is determined to advocate for improvements to the quantity and range of services available locally so that residents are not required to leave the region in order to access higher levels of health care. It is collectively understood within City Council that health spending has a large impact on the State Government budget, however the City of Mount Gambier remains adamant that service availability should not be less than metropolitan Adelaide and continues to work toward building the resilience, initiative and capacity of the community to make quality health decisions.

It will not always be possible to provide certain specialist services locally and the Council recognises that it is essential that persons requiring services (and their families) be given proper support in such instances.

In addition, improved mental health support services and facilities are desperately needed to meet the local demand and the City Council continues to advocate for greater resources at the local level.

### Education

Establishing Mount Gambier as a Lifelong Learning community does not start and end with tertiary education. Lifelong Learning commences at birth and embraces early childhood development, primary and secondary education and trades and tertiary education and most importantly the community's ongoing involvement in community endeavours which is learning through life.

The City of Mount Gambier is actively working to increase the local educational opportunities for people to continue past secondary school and has already benefited from the commencement of degree programs offered through Flinders University, Uni SA and Southern Cross University. However the need remains to be able to expand the number of full degree programs available locally.

The City of Mount Gambier remains committed to creating the environment for Mount Gambier to be a learning City which will retain local students and attract students to Mount Gambier for quality education experiences.

The strategic vision supports the premise that the greater the knowledge and skills of our people the more dynamic and robust the community becomes.

The City of Mount Gambier has embraced the significance of quality Health and Education opportunities as sound attraction and retention principles in the growth of the City and region. The quality of relationships that have been developed between stakeholders has certainly produced some inspirational outcomes that reflect the heart of the community.

## Collaboration between local government and health educators

A strong collaboration has developed between the Flinders University Rural Clinical School and with the City of Mount Gambier to benefit medical education, the rural workforce and health in local communities. Examples of mutual engagement include:

- Participation of Council representatives on the FURCS Community Advisory Board and Regional Advisory Committee,
- Membership of Flinders University local staff on the Council's Mount Gambier and District Tertiary Education Grants Program. This grants program provides scholarships of up to \$2000 for students who are studying medicine or allied health degrees, targeted to the vocations identified as local workforce needs,
- Rural Community Week where 2<sup>nd</sup> year Flinders University medical students from Adelaide visit the region and conduct community research projects that will benefit the health of the community. Council participates in some of these projects,

- Promoting Health Careers to secondary students through council supported Careers Expos,
- A councillor is part of selection panel which determines in which rural location medical students on longitudinal placements will be placed,
- Council have contributed funding for medical simulation equipment,
- Council have contributed funding for student housing,
- Events to welcome and engage students in the region. Council were instrumental in establishing Your Professional Network and engaging FURCS to promote and participate in events. Combined attendance at welcome events,
- Collaborative marketing and promotion,
- Mentoring opportunities with secondary students.

### New program initiatives

In 2010, the collaboration reached a new level with the introduction of the Local Government's 'LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE' program for lifelong learning and the University's 'IMMERSe' program for tertiary health science students.

#### **LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE**

The City of Mount Gambier has adopted Lifelong Learning as a key theme and strategy. The logo LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE is marketed throughout the City during the year with *"Live and Learn in Mount Gambier and Imagine the possibilities"*(9).

The general level of education and qualifications in the Limestone Coast Region is below the state average, with comparatively low levels of school achievement and post school qualifications. This in no way reflects the quality of education available, it is a reflection of the expense incurred by rural students and their families to access Tertiary Education and the availability of employment that lures school leavers away from their education journey. As a result an entrenched culture has existed that places a limited value on Tertiary Education and a high value on work ethic and income. But this is all changing because of advancements in technology that give local businesses global reach, increased opportunities for employment within all health sectors, and greater awareness of the higher education that can be delivered locally.

Our community is now demanding equitable access to higher education and health services and, as at the regional community level councils, universities and health service providers are responding as regional communities do best, through collaboration.

Our fundamental focus is on learning in all its forms being a lifelong activity and a core resource of community members. This is reflected in the simple statement in the City of Mount Gambier vision: "To be recognised as a lifelong learning community which encourages, respects and celebrates learning"(9)

It is not the role of the council to take responsibility for, nor be a player in, education delivery in our city. However, Council can and does facilitate information sharing and brokering of cooperative opportunities to:

- dramatically reflect its commitment to the value of learning in our communities
- reinforce the message that learning and education are fundamental building blocks of a strong community
- understand the issues and opportunities facing education and advocate effectively on behalf of the community
- foster a united and shared understanding of the way forward

- increase the awareness throughout the general community, industry, school leavers and secondary teaching staff of the opportunities that are available locally through effective communication and marketing
- support the development of student accommodation that supports the attraction of Regional and International enrolments
- establish active transport routes that make the City accessible to students
- remain committed to supporting the presence and expansion of our local Tertiary Institutions.

The role of City Council ensures that the community continues to be consulted and informed of progression and that any expansion remains responsive to the actual needs of the community.

### **IMMERSe**

The Flinders University IMMERSe program commenced in 2010 with five students from the disciplines of Paramedics, Speech Pathology and Nutrition and Dietetics. The students learned by immersing themselves into the Mount Gambier community and health settings for most of the academic year. Coursework included work placements, community projects, research projects, and interprofessional learning tutorials. The interprofessional learning sessions provided an opportunity to find out about each other's professions and commonalities.

The aims were to:

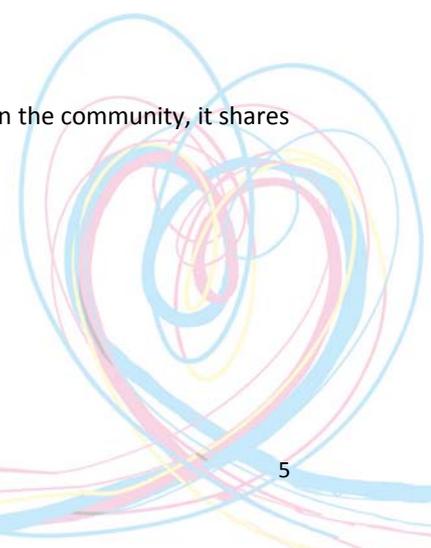
- promote benefits of a rural career by experience gained in longitudinal placement
- produce work ready graduates who appreciated the needs of rural communities
- develop interprofessional education
- provide rural research and practice opportunities
- strengthen the rural health workforce and career pathways
- develop clinical education expertise in rural settings particularly around interprofessional learning
- provide pastoral care to students on placement to ensure transition to country life was smooth and supportive.

Whilst an evaluation of the IMMERSe pilot is currently being prepared, it is clear that several outcomes have been achieved. Two of the three graduating students have gained employment in allied health in rural and remote areas. All five students indicated that they gained a greater appreciation of the health needs of rural communities. All students reported enjoyment of their rural experience and felt supported locally. All students reflected that they have developed knowledge and skills in working interprofessionally, and the clinicians report they have gained expertise in clinical education. Community agencies have benefited by the introduction of several health initiatives such as improved dietary guidelines in Mount Gambier Hospital kitchen. Therefore, the upskilling of all participants in this innovative education model has produced benefits and health outcomes in the rural community of Mount Gambier.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst the 'LIVE.LEARN.IMAGINE' program encompasses learning across all sectors in the community, it shares many common goals to the IMMERSe program:

- promoting learning in rural settings
- assisting students of local families to achieve a tertiary education
- providing community and social support to those studying in the region



- immersion into rural community activities that benefit the broader community
- developing graduates who understand the needs of rural communities
- growing a rural health workforce.

These programs build on the already established foundation of collaboration between Mount Gambier City Council and FURCS to meet these common goals. Local Government can and does play an important role in rural health education and in addressing local health care needs. The authors recommend that there is continued support given for local governments and local educators to work together in these healthy community partnerships.

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