

Indigenous health—the career intentions of generation ‘next’

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Margie Mahon has more than 20 years’ experience in policy and project management in a variety of rural industries, including agriculture, mining and food processing.

She comes from a farming family on the Darling Downs in Queensland, which not only gives her a strong sense of connection to the bush but also provides her with first-hand knowledge of the health challenges faced by rural communities.

Margie ran her own consulting business for 12 years, specialising in occupational health and safety (OH&S) for rural industries. This included recruitment of health and safety professionals.

She was the Executive Officer from 1991 to 1996 for Farmsafe Queensland, where she led a highly effective team that delivered a range of educational and training programs around agricultural safety systems.

She received a Churchill Fellowship in 1997 and travelled to the United States of America and Canada to learn from their experiences in rural OH&S.

Margie later became National Program Manager OH&S for Meat and Livestock Australia where she coordinated national research strategy and programs. She consulted broadly with unions, employers and government to ensure effective implementation of safety programs.

Before joining Rural Health Workforce Australia in 2009, Margie was the Executive Officer to the Clinical Network Program at Cancer Council Victoria.

At RHWA she oversees the programs relating to the recruitment and retention of health professionals in rural and remote Australia. She collaborates with government, rural workforce agencies and professional organisations on program delivery.

Background

Indigenous health remains the single most significant unmet health care challenge for the nation with this group of disadvantaged Australians suffering a life expectancy gap of 10–12 years when compared with the community in general. Indigenous people, constituting 2.5% of the population, are generally less healthy than other Australians, die much younger, experience more disability and have a lower quality of life.¹

With workforce the key enabler for any strategy designed to address the health deficits of Indigenous communities it is of pressing importance to gauge the interest of the next generation of health professionals in meeting this challenge. It is also critical that we understand those factors that influence a student’s orientation towards practice in Indigenous health.

Overview

This paper will examine the practice intentions of 240 student health professionals who attended the NURHC Conference in Alice Springs in July 2010. The survey covered students’ intentions to practise in rural and remote locations after graduation and specifically explored attitudes towards future practice in Indigenous health. This study promises to provide important insights into what motivates a student’s interest in Indigenous health and conversely what serves to discourage this orientation. Also of interest will be students’ perceptions of the adequacy of Indigenous cultural awareness training provided during their undergraduate years.

Method

Analysis will be based on data acquired through the administration of a two-page questionnaire to student health professionals at the National Undergraduate Rural Health Conference (NURHC), which was held in Alice Springs in July 2010. All participants completed forms consenting to have their responses used for research purposes. Opportunity exists to do follow-up studies with responders asked to nominate their interest in future research projects.

Conclusion

The findings of this study will afford fresh insights into the willingness and readiness of the next generation of health professionals to accept the challenge of 'closing the gap' in health outcomes for our first Australians.

Reference

- 1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, AIHW (2010), *Australia's Health 2010* p. 228.