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RURAL HEALTH WORKFORCE TRAINING: A 20-YEAR SUCCESS STORY

The viability of rural and remote communities depends on access to quality health services, which, in turn, relies on being able to attract a highly trained, sustainable health workforce.

The Australian Journal of Rural Health, in its trans-Tasman October issue\(^1\), reports on the 20-year record of success of the University Departments of Rural Health (UDRHs) and the Rural Clinical Schools (RCSs) in developing a health workforce that is oriented to working in rural and remote communities.

UDRHs are designed to have a strong population health focus, with the flexibility to meet regional needs and enable community, health service and health professional participation, guided by Regional Advisory Committees on direction and accountability to the region.

Twenty years of Australian Government investment in UDRHs and RCSs has created a national network of rurally based academic units that deliver academically enriched clinical education and training for medical, nursing and allied health students and fulfil an essential academic role for the health system in rural and remote Australia.

The number of students accessing RCS and UDRH programs has increased significantly. Medical student numbers in long-term RCS placements have tripled since the early 2000s, with more than 1200 students now accepted annually.

Lead authors on the Journal article, David Lyle and Jenene Greenhill, believe the UDRH and RCS programs are also about building links between the local rural health workforce and communities.

“University Departments of Rural Health and Rural Clinical Schools have really earned their place in the rural and remote health landscape – as key contributors to the future viability of health services and workforce across Australia,” Dr Lyle said.

\(^1\) Lyle D and Greenhill J. Two decades of building capacity in rural health education, training and research in Australia: University Departments of Rural Health and Rural Clinical Schools Aust.J.Rural Health. Oct 2018
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The National Rural Health Alliance is Australia’s peak non-government organisation for rural and remote health.
Professor Greenhill added that the links between the student workforce and local communities was a key to the future sustainability of Australia’s rural health workforce.

“Our students are inspiring young people who reinvigorate our towns with their enthusiasm for learning. We all benefit from innovative student placements when communities collaborate with universities and health services,” she said.

Multidisciplinary UDRHs and RCSs were established in 1996 in non-metropolitan centres across Australia to focus on medical student training. These training centres aimed to attract medical, nursing and allied health professionals to reside and practise in rural and remote communities.

The network covers areas such as Broken Hill, Mount Isa, Launceston, Alice Springs, Darwin, Shepparton, Warrnambool, Whyalla, Renmark, Wagga, Wodonga, Kalgoorlie, Freemantle, Darling Downs and Cairns.

Nursing and allied health student numbers doubled over 10 years from 2004 to 2013, in addition to the significant numbers of medical students on short placements supported by the UDRHs during that time. That number and proportion of student enrolments accessing UDRHs is projected to more than double again by 2018.

There are good signs that Aboriginal health is benefitting too. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation has also increased markedly with 327 Indigenous medical students enrolled across all UDRHs and RCSs in the current academic year. There have been a total of 260 medical graduates since 2007. A significant contribution by the Centre for Remote Health at Alice Springs has been the development and delivery of a graduate program in remote and Indigenous health.

The UDRHs and RCSs have established strong research partnerships with health services, rural workforce agencies and other research centres and support rurally based early-career researchers and PhD students.

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