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Remote area health: Not complaining but not complacent

The biggest ever remote and rural health conference began today in Alice Springs with 1,000 health sector representatives anxious to know that governments recognise the major challenge they face and will continue to treat it as a priority. To place the remote and rural health sector on an even footing with city areas will require persistence and innovation from the health sector itself, and increased activity and support from governments.

“The mood in remote and rural health is one of concern, but not yet panic,” according to NRHA Chairperson Sue McAlpin.

“It seems to be ‘groundhog day’ in remote and rural health policy but there are urgent challenges that require a more active and innovative approach than this.”

“Because of increasing national and international shortages of skilled workers and a smaller proportion of working-age people overall in the future, the workforce shortages are likely to get worse before they get better.”

Chronic disease is the modern epidemic and early intervention through lifestyle programs require sustained partnerships between health agencies and local communities. This needs long-term support for successful programs, not more one-off trials. The current debate about Australia’s infrastructure is focused on its essential role in enabling Australia’s exports. But at the Conference the focus is on the impact of degraded infrastructure on the capacity to deliver good health services.

All parties agree that a primary health care approach to remote and rural health is needed. This will require a better understanding of the socioeconomic determinants of health and more accommodation of intersectoral linkages between health and other factors, such as ecological change and education.

Despite the challenges, delegates come to the Conference with hope and confidence for the future. Newer health professions can be expanded, a greater emphasis given to health teams, and more use made of interprofessional education.

“We want to be high on the Government’s agenda. The NRHA has suggested the goal of equivalent health in remote and rural areas by 2020. We are not complaining, but neither are we complacent,” Ms McAlpin said.

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