How do we get the rural workforce we need?

The current issue of the Australian Journal of Rural Health (AJRH, April 2014) points to some of the answers.

In his editorial entitled "Rethinking Medicare: Some rural considerations" AJRH editor Professor David Perkins links the current discussion about the role of Medicare with workforce planning: "Medicare is an insurance system designed to assist the population to afford medical services [but] it depends on the decisions of doctors and other clinicians about where they wish to live and practise." He writes about the unequal distribution of health professionals in rural and remote areas. Some possible solutions have been implemented: training places have been increased; direct support for health students from rural and remote communities has been improved; rural and remote training placements encourage young health professionals to consider careers in the bush; strong professional mentoring smooths the way for new entrants to rural practice.

Several of the articles in this issue of AJRH validate these approaches. In a study of factors motivating James Cook University medical graduates’ choice of internship location and beyond, Anna Schauer and colleagues found that choice of internship location to be mostly based on personal reasons, but subsequent relocations are driven by career ambitions. Casey Jane Rowe and colleagues report on a survey of post graduate junior doctors which highlights the fact that that junior doctors find rural practice terms to be challenging, although beneficial to their training. The results also reveal that rural practice terms result in a change in junior doctors’ care of rural patients in metropolitan hospitals and can help to foster a desire to practise rural medicine.

In a study of prevocational exposure to public health in the Kimberley, Alexandra Hofer and her colleagues conclude Residential Medical Officers who have previously completed this placement frequently pursue further training in general practice, public health, Aboriginal health and rural medicine.

In the same issue, Caroline O Laurence and her colleagues study the differences in financial costs for teaching in rural and urban Australian general practices, Debra A Dunstan and others write about the importance of mentoring in people working with those suffering from severe mental illness, and Leonard Crocombe and others expand on training rural dentists.

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