Foreword

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Chairperson
National Rural Health Alliance

5th National Rural Health Conference
Adelaide, South Australia, 14-17th March 1999
Proceedings
Foreword

The National Rural Health Conference is firmly established as the major biennial event in the Australian Rural Health Calendar. It brings together, in a collaborative way, the diverse interests of rural and remote health consumers, practitioners, academics, specialists, governments and both government and non-government agencies. The result is a unique forum for the voice of country people to be heard on the health and health services issues that continue to concern our communities living outside the metropolitan areas.

The National Rural Health Alliance believes that, since the first conference eight years ago, the National Rural Health Conference has taken on a key industry role in monitoring ongoing health related issues; reporting back to rural and remote constituents on achievements within the sector; keeping health practitioners informed of developments in health service delivery in rural and remote areas; making recommendations to government and monitoring responses; questioning non-achievement in government programs; encouraging rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of programs at the practical ‘grass roots’ level; and, of course, encouraging continuing innovation in service delivery.

The Fifth Conference catered for the needs of delegates from every interest group within the sector and across cultures. The launch of Healthy Horizons at the Conference was especially noteworthy. This initiative has provided us all, consumers, practitioners and governments, with a solid framework within which we can move forward and work together to achieve our national and local goals. Nevertheless, we must be vigilant to ensure that progress with Healthy Horizons is monitored regularly and achievements measured.

In addition, many delegates valued the opportunity, peculiar to this Conference, to engage with the issues at the creative, emotional level through the inspired and interactive artwork, musical activities and theatre performances that were threaded throughout the program.

It is fair to say that the Fifth National Conference has set a high standard. Although there will doubtless be areas that need some fine-tuning, overall the Conference was very successful in achieving its objectives.

All praise must go to the tireless work of the Executive Director of the Alliance, Gordon Gregory, to Conference Manager, Sally Stevenson, for an outstanding job and to the Conference Organising Committee and Reference Group. In addition, our thanks go also to the staff of the National Rural Health Alliance who, as always, performed beyond the call of duty to ensure that all went smoothly.
On behalf of the Council of the National Rural Health Alliance, I would like to congratulate all the participants for their valuable contribution to the Conference: without the energy and input of the delegates, no conference can succeed.

As I said at the final session of the Conference: "Right now there is a good chance of making a real difference to health outcomes. Right now may be our best chance."

I recommend these Proceedings to you; and take the opportunity to extend an invitation to all to join us for the Sixth National Conference to be held in Canberra in 2001.

John Lawrence
Chairperson
National Rural Health Alliance
May 1999
Acknowledgements

The National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA) would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the following groups.

MAJOR SPONSORS

The Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, in particular:

- the Rural Health Support, Education and Training Program;
- the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health;
- the Population Health Division; and
- the General Practice Branch.

The Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services

The Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation

The Department of Human Services, South Australia

The Department of Premier and Cabinet, South Australia

H B International

Blackwell Science Asia

Ansett Australia

The Australia Council and Arts South Australia for financial support for the Arts program.

CONFERENCE ORGANISING COMMITTEE

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The Alliance would also like to thank all of the team members at the NRHA office for their enthusiasm and boundless energy in the weeks leading up to the Conference, and during the Conference itself where they undertook an enormous array of tasks with great efficiency, cheerfulness and dedication. Sally Stevenson, as the Alliance's Conference Manager, bore the greatest load and the success of the event owes much to the way tasks were handled. Team members are Toni Alexandrow, Pat Allen, Leanne Coleman, Noela Lippert, and Maria Vincent. Thanks to Yvonne Cramer who organised such comprehensive media exposure for the Conference and to Colleen Sheen, Manager, Australian Journal of Rural Health, for her valuable contribution. Acknowledgement too of the hard work of Anita Phillips, Manager of the friends of the Alliance, especially in the successful launch of the new organisation. A special thanks to Lexia Smallwood and Helen Pampling who prepared the proceedings for publication; and to Lexia for keeping things going in the Canberra office whilst the team was in Adelaide.

The Alliance would also like to acknowledge the work done by Jim Groves, webmaster of the Alliance's Web site, who provided Internet updates throughout the Conference, and who has worked hard to ensure that the site evolves into a valuable resource for the improvement of rural and remote health.

Finally, the Alliance would like to thank Spectrum Graphics of Canberra for the graphic design of the Conference materials, and NetImpact Publishing of Canberra for the preparation and publication of these Proceedings.
Conference Processes

The aim of the Alliance and the Conference Organising Committee has been to develop processes that encourage a high level of participant involvement in the Conference by ensuring ease of access to information, and facilitating input. Therefore, a number of new initiatives were introduced in the preparation for the Fifth Conference, which sought an active involvement from rural and remote people in debating topics and providing recommendations. A great deal of thought has been put into maximising the interactive aspects of the Conference. The following is an outline of these processes and some of the issues that have been raised.

PRE-CONFERENCE

The pre-conference processes were in three parts:

Registration

Online registration was introduced for the first time for a National Rural Health Conference to provide quick, streamlined processes. It proved to be very popular and a great time saver for many delegates.

Establishing a Conference Web Site

For people with access to the Internet this was a very useful initiative. The site was linked to that of the National Rural Health Alliance at http://www.ruralhealth.org.au and was easy to access. Information posted on conference details was kept up-to-date. The conference program was posted (with timely updates) so that people had a good idea of the content of the conference from an early stage. All Presentation Abstracts received were posted to the site as soon as they became available.

Establishing a Pre-Conference Online Forum

With the posting of the Abstracts, an interactive forum was established on the Web site. This took the form of a special pre-Conference discussion facility available for each Abstract. It provided a forum for participants but was used only moderately. This is a feature that will be expanded, and widely advertised before the next conference.

It is timely to remind people that the NRHA Web site is a valuable resource for rural and remote people with access to the Internet. Many critical items are posted 'as the news is breaking', it also links with other sites of health related interest for rural and remote communities and individuals. Furthermore, an 'e-forum' or interactive newsletter is sent out on a regular basis.
The Alliance would like to take this opportunity to extend an invitation to individuals and groups to become involved with the dissemination of rural and remote area health and health service information through the use of the site. It is a handy mechanism to provide information to the Alliance members, their constituents and others on areas of interest and/or concern. It is appreciated that many rural and remote health communities do not yet have access to the Internet and email and the Alliance is continuing to promote the need to fill this gap.

CONFERENCE

The purpose of the National Rural Health Conference is to facilitate improvements in the health of people in the bush and the delivery of health services to them, and to support the health workers who provide the services.

With this in mind the processes of the Conference itself were designed to:

- maximise the flow of information both formally and informally. The formal flow was ensured through the content of the presentations and the allocation of a small amount of time for questions in the concurrent sessions and within the plenary forum; the informal flow was facilitated through ensuring that breaks between sessions were long enough for constructive networking as well as through the various social activities;
- ensure that delegates were able to obtain information through a range of media. To this end, there was an extensive use of the Arts, in a variety of forms. The performances and other activities were designed to present information as entertainment, to some people a more meaningful experience than the formal presentations, and a form that is underused even in the delivery of primary health care messages;
- be inclusive of the diversity of needs and experiences of rural and remote communities, including all the health professions involved in delivering health services. It was also designed to be inclusive of the cultural diversity that is a hallmark of contemporary rural and remote Australia;
- include quality poster presentations, a mode of expression which is able to give a succinct overview of valuable initiatives, many of them presenting health care models that can be adapted for use on a wider basis; and
- provide delegates with access to a distinctive trade display. The numbers of people who sought information from the many booths demonstrated their value to participants.

Recommendations process

A major objective of the Fifth National Conference, as it has been of all previous ones, was to invite and develop recommendations. Three methods were used to facilitate this process:

1. Delegates were invited to develop individual recommendations and boxes were placed in strategic locations around the Conference venue to receive them.
2. At the end of the concurrent sessions, delegates were asked to nominate recommendations on any of the issues presented and these were recorded by the Chairperson of the session.
3. An open plenary forum was held which invited recommendations and comments from the floor. These recommendations were recorded.
All recommendations that were received have been consolidated and are presented in this publication, and have also been published on the Web site.

**Conference Sessions**

Ninety-nine papers were presented at the Conference. Ten keynote addresses and 89 concurrent session papers. There were 36 concurrent sessions.

The Alliance considers that the information contained in these papers is a valuable resource for rural and remote communities in improving their health, and that they should be available to as many people as possible whether they were able to attend the Conference or not. Every effort has been made to include all papers in this publication and we regret that not all have been available.

**POST-CONFERENCE**

**Publishing the Conference proceedings**

The Conference Proceedings will be published in three formats:

- paperback book;
- CD-ROM; and
- at the Alliance’s Web site.

The aim is to maximise the dissemination of information.

**The Conference Evaluation Process.**

The Alliance will be undertaking a post conference evaluation process that will include examination of:

- feedback from the Conference delegates through the evaluation form on content, consumer involvement and programming;
- feedback from staff, members of Council and members of the Conference Reference Group;
- ways to improve electronic transfer of information - pre and post conference;
- ways to improve interaction with the public as well as health professionals; and
- ways to improve processes for speakers
Members of Council of the National Rural Health Alliance