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Commitment to rural health hubs delights sector

The organisation representing rural doctors and nurses today said the Minister of Health's commitment to rural health training hubs had the opportunity to revolutionise rural health service delivery in New Zealand.

Speaking at the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network's annual conference this morning, the Minister of Health said he favoured an approach of developing rural training hubs in which a range of medical professionals are trained inside rural communities. He also announced that he would be asking the sector to develop an implementation programme for the first rural health training hub, from which more would follow.

NZRGPN Chief Executive Dalton Kelly said this was a hugely significant announcement that would delight the rural health sector.

"This is precisely the approach that is needed if New Zealand is to avoid a rural health crisis and instead build a strong, sustainable, world-class rural health workforce," he said.

"This is the model that has been widely used in Australia and which has helped transform rural health service delivery. Training doctors, nurses, and a range of other medical professionals inside our rural communities will build and retain a strong rural health workforce and deliver significant social and economic benefits for rural towns and regions.

"There is no longer any reason why health training must be done in major cities and hospitals. The evidence shows that training based in rural communities exposes students to a wider range of clinical experience and can help develop more flexible and experienced medical professionals."

Dalton Kelly said students training in rural communities tended to stay there and become part of the community.

"Today's announcement is very important. The rural health sector has become increasingly concerned at the steadily declining numbers of doctors and nurses choosing to practice in rural communities and the implications of this for equitable access to health care.

"The Minister has been listening to rural communities and to the rural health sector and his approach is the right one. There is a lot of detail to work through, but we're delighted with the commitment to this approach and with the announcement that we're going to get cracking!"

The conference also gave a standing ovation to Australia's first ever National Rural Health Commissioner, Professor Paul Worley, who has been widely credited with revolutionizing rural health service delivery in Australia through the introduction of rural health training hubs.

Professor Worley told the 400 delegates that New Zealand had the opportunity to lead the world in rural health and also congratulated the Minister on his announcement.