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Research to define 'rural' vital for effective policy

The New Zealand Rural General Practice Network today welcomed the Health Research Council's decision to fund a research proposal seeking to develop a consistent definition of 'rural'.

The NZRGPN is the membership organisation representing almost every rural medical practice in the country, as well as the Rural Hospital Network and Rural Nurses.

"Securing funding for this research proposal, which will be led by respected clinician and University of Otago academic Dr Garry Nixon, is an important development for all of New Zealand," said NZRGPN Chief Executive, Dalton Kelly.

"Generating a clear and consistent definition of what we mean by the term 'rural' sounds mundane and, frankly, boring. But the lack of a consistent definition is leading to inefficient and poorly designed policy and the inability to accurately measure rural outcomes," said Chief Executive, Dalton Kelly.

"We have been pushing for this research to be funded as a priority as it is critical to improving rural health outcomes and the development of effective rural health policy."

Dalton Kelly said there are currently at least 17 different ways in which we define the term 'rural' in the New Zealand health system. By way of an example as to why this is important, around 40 per cent of people who access rural health services are currently classified as 'urban' under the Statistics New Zealand definition, while 20 per cent of people currently classified as 'rural' actually have ready access to urban health services.

"As a result, we simply cannot accurately measure outcomes or performance in the rural sector," he said.

"Garry's research will provide a bedrock for future measurement and benchmarking and I hope it will become adopted across government. Funding for this research is consistent with the Government's Future Proofing policy and its findings will be very important to consider in the design and establishment of a network of rural health training hubs over the coming months and years."

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