Rural Health Careers Promotion - an update
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**RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE RURAL HEALTH WORKFORCE**

New Zealand is facing serious structural challenges in its commitment to the equitable delivery of healthcare services to rural communities.

This update outlines and introduces a critically important initiative currently being delivered by the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network (NZRGPN) to address these challenges by actively encouraging rural secondary school students to consider and then pursue a healthcare career. We call this our Rural Health Careers Promotion programme.

This is an opportunity to give you an understanding of what we have been doing, why it matters, what we believe it is achieving and how we intend to build on this vitally important work. We believe that developing a pipeline of rural health professionals, starting with our rural youth, is the key to a future rural health workforce.

**WHAT THE RURAL HEALTH CRISIS IS ALL ABOUT**

Before we start to look at this programme, we need to understand the scale of the challenges in rural health service delivery. The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners recently released its annual workforce survey. Here are a few stats:

- More than half of all GPs are over 52 years old. More than one third of GPs intend to retire in the next five years and 57 per cent in the next 10 years. The forecast retirement rates for rural GPs is even higher than for their urban counterparts;
- Almost 40 per cent of respondents in rural practices report a current GP vacancy;
- Rural communities are twice as likely to be relying on short-term employees or contractors compared to urban centres;
- Almost half of all rural GPs are now international doctors that have graduated in other countries before moving to New Zealand;
- More than a quarter of all GPs (urban and rural) are experiencing burnout and our concern for the mental and physical wellbeing of rural doctors continues to increase;
- Rural GPs are working longer hours than urban GPs and three quarters of rural GPs are providing after-hours and emergency care.

These worrying statistics are also reflected with our rural nurses, dentists, pharmacists and others in the rural health workforce. Addressing these issues are the drivers behind the subject of this update – our Rural Health Careers Promotion programme.

For more detail, here’s an opinion editorial published recently by the NZRGPN CEO, Dalton Kelly, which was published in the New Zealand Herald:


**INTRODUCING THE NEW ZEALAND RURAL GENERAL PRACTICE NETWORK**

The NZRGPN is the only membership-based organisation representing rural healthcare professionals in New Zealand. Almost every rural medical practice chooses to be a member. The Network works closely with other rural health organisations, including the New Zealand Rural Hospital Network and Rural Nurses New Zealand.

The Network is focussed on advocacy on behalf of its members around issues of concern to them. Currently advocacy is squarely focussed on the changes to the health and education systems required to begin to rebuild a sustainable rural health workforce.

The Network also holds the Ministry of Health contract to recruit international GPs to fill gaps in our rural communities. Every year the Network, via its NZLocums division, recruits around 80-90 international GPs and brings them to New Zealand to care for rural communities. This is a critically important government initiative that is keeping many rural communities connected with a doctor.

Based in Wellington, the NZRGPN has a team of 15 people who play an important role in ensuring rural New Zealanders have equitable access to primary health care services.
THE SOLUTION: ENCOURAGING RURAL YOUNG PEOPLE INTO HEALTH CAREERS

NZRGPN welcomed the government’s confirmation that it will establish a network of rural health training hubs as part of its commitment to addressing the rural health workforce shortage.

The Health Minister, the Hon Dr David Clark, made this commitment at the NZRGPN’s annual National Rural Health Conference in April 2019. Many in the rural health sector, including health training organisations, have been advocating for this solution for a long time.

Part of the problem is that we might be training enough doctors and nurses for the future, but we’re training them in the cities and they’re not moving into rural communities. They complete their training in the cities, make their friends in the cities, meet their partners in the cities and subsequently, stay in the cities.

The other part of the problem is that we have to be much more proactive and effective in encouraging rural secondary school students into rural healthcare careers.

Both of these initiatives must be advanced, in tandem, if we are to transform rural health service delivery. We must address both ends of the rural health workforce training pipeline.

The NZRGPN has built a comprehensive outreach and engagement programme to target rural tertiary and secondary school students and actively encourages them to consider careers in healthcare. Over 2019 we have been significantly expanding this programme.

Such is the strength of feedback we are receiving from rural schools, communities and tertiary students that we are committed to continuing to expand this already comprehensive programme.

RURAL HEALTH CAREERS PROMOTION – BY STUDENTS FOR STUDENTS

Over recent years, the NZRGPN has partnered with tertiary health students and have together embarked on a programme of visits to rural and provincial schools across New Zealand to promote rural health as a viable career.

The tertiary students who front these tours are frequently members of Students of Rural Health Aotearoa – New Zealand’s only rural health student network which has been created and supported by the NZRGPN.

Given the consistently positive feedback that these tours generate, we have been extensively building on them over the last two years and we now offer a comprehensive national programme.

We have dedicated resources to the continual rollout of this programme in order to maximise our reach to year 9 and 10 students across rural New Zealand. We are also deeply grateful for the passion and commitment of our tertiary health students who freely give their time to attend these tours and talk to the pupils. These are tertiary students speaking with secondary school students – there is an immediate connection between young people from rural backgrounds and the sessions are inspirational for both the tertiary and secondary students.

There is now a significant body of evidence both in New Zealand and overseas showing that in order to attract health professionals to rural practice recruitment needs to commence in our schools, with undergraduate curricula offering either targeted rural streams or large amounts of exposure to rural settings in the main curriculum.

There is also evidence that students should be given career information prior to year 10 with further guidance provided in the final two years of secondary school. Research has indicated that having information prior to year 10 is critical as most young people make their career choice sometime between years 10 and 12.

Reaching precisely these students in significant numbers with the goal of encouraging rural health careers is the focus of the Rural Health Careers Promotion programme.

CASE STUDY: JUNE 2019 RURAL HEALTH CAREERS PROMOTION NATIONAL TOUR

In June 2019, the NZRGPN commenced its biggest and most concentrated national rural schools tour to date.

Twenty tertiary students training across a range of health disciplines including nursing, psychology, dentistry, pharmacy and medicine at the Universities of Otago, Victoria, Massey and Auckland and several Polytechnics, participated in tightly coordinated visits to 34 rural schools across the country.

The multidisciplinary nature of these tours is crucial. It is not enough to simply encourage rural secondary students to pursue careers as doctors and nurses. Rural communities need and deserve the full suite of healthcare professionals, it is important for secondary students to see the full breadth of career opportunities available to them under the health umbrella.

Similarly, the NZRGPN is committed to targeting diversity in the students it seeks to reach. It’s no secret that Maori have both measurably poorer health outcomes than for non-Maori and that many Maori live in our smaller and remote communities, with higher levels of deprivation. While we need to encourage rural students into health careers, and highlight the path that can be followed, our programme also focusses on encouraging Maori students into these careers.

The NZRGPN is committed to doing whatever we can to reduce the inequities in Maori health outcomes and so with the guidance of Te Roopu Arahi, our Maori Advisory group, we ensure the programme is offered in rural areas where there is a higher population of Maori and in Kura that have year 9 and 10 students enrolled.

The importance of encouraging rangatahi to think about a career in health is one way we can help build a strong rural Maori health workforce.

Most of the tertiary students who presented these sessions were themselves from rural backgrounds and were very motivated to reach out to young people from similar rural New Zealand areas, with a number of students returning to their own former schools.

“The visit was fantastic, and my students really appreciated the insight shown, the different pathways taken, the honesty of the students and the encouragement to enter the profession. Also, that there is more than one way to reach your end goals! All this information coming from actual students rather than me or someone older has a huge impact and I know that the visit has spurred many of them on to keep trying and endeavouring to reach their course for next year. We would welcome you back next year with open arms if we get the opportunity! See you then I hope!”

Kay Grant, Careers Adviser, Taupo-Nui-a-Tia College

This tour generated a large volume of media coverage, interest from local MPs and requests for repeat and more extensive visits. Here is an indicative example from the Timaru Herald:


The tour reached thousands of secondary school students who may never have considered a career in health. Much of the feedback received was that until this visit, the possibility had not occurred to many of them.

“The students that came out to East Otago High School did a great job. They were knowledgeable about their chosen career pathways, honest about the course requirements and developed trust amongst the students quickly. They enjoyed the practical aspects the students demonstrated during the visit. Would definitely have them back,”

Marcus Cooper, Principal, East Otago High School

Every session at each school was carefully tailored according to the age level of the audience – from Year 9 up to year 13 – with the key emphasis being on students in year 9 – 10. Generally, the sessions were structured with a short presentation from the tertiary students after which the students were split into groups to rotate around a range of hands-on health-related activities - CPR, taking blood pressure, testing reflexes and bandaging, as examples.

At the end of a session each student completed a feedback form which, when analysed, clearly demonstrated an increased interest in rural health careers.

“… from a staff point of view the session was extremely successful, and I was very impressed at the level of engagement your tertiary students engendered. The feedback I have had from our students that attended was 100% positive and they found the session both interesting and informative. We would welcome a return visit,”

Donna Richards, Careers Administrator, Palmerston North Girls’ High School

Noella Farrell shows Mountainview High School student Thomas Hart, 14, how to take someone’s blood pressure
For many of the young people, the concept of leaving their home to study at an urban-based tertiary training institution may have been daunting or not previously considered, but our tertiary students provided them with the information, encouragement and clarity around what was required and how it could be pursued to enable them to give a health career serious consideration.

“My students absolutely loved the session; they were buzzing afterwards,”
Jo Ager, Careers Adviser, Darfield High School

After reading the feedback forms, many of the tertiary students commented on how humbled and rewarded they felt from the experience – seeing with their own eyes the barriers some rural young people face, and how their visits can provide hope and possibilities.

“Thank you so much for allowing us the opportunity to have you come and visit. From all accounts the kids really enjoyed it and have been talking about it all day,”
Annie Butler, Teacher, Tongariro Area School

An additional component of the programme was the opportunity for the tertiary students to visit a number of rural practices, hospitals and rural health champions. This enabled them to find out more about the good things happening out there - services such as PRIME, community/iwi health services and how enriching working rurally really is. The rural hosts were, likewise, very excited to have this next generation of health professionals in their midst to hear their stories and possibly come back to work with them once they are qualified.

THE FUTURE OF THE RURAL HEALTH CAREERS PROMOTION PROGRAMME

This rural healthcare outreach programme is the only concerted programme of its kind in New Zealand. It is filling a serious gap in reaching our rural secondary students to build the very beginning of a rural health workforce pipeline.

The NZRGPN is developing and will soon launch New Zealand’s first comprehensive website dedicated to the promotion of rural health careers. The website will contain all the information covered in the sessions and much more. It will possess the mechanism to enable rural school students to directly engage with and ask questions of young rural health students and professionals, thus providing the beginning of an online mentoring network. It will also enable tertiary students to receive professional advice from current rural health professionals. The rural school and community visits will be showcased and promoted so those interested in being involved can contact us and register their interest in future visits.

The NZRGPN has prepared the next rural school and community tours which are scheduled to be rolled out between now and November to Southland, the West Coast of the South Island, Wairarapa, Hawke’s Bay, Taranaki, Waikato, Coromandel, the East Coast of the North Island and Northland.

CONCLUSION – INSPIRING RURAL HEALTH CAREERS

The future of rural health in New Zealand rests with our young people – it’s as simple as that. We’re actively implementing and continuing to build an outreach programme “by young people for young people” that is now starting to make a real difference. Likewise, on the tour the tertiary health students are given the opportunity to experience the many positive aspects of a rural health career when they visit the rural hospitals and practices in the areas they visit.

NZRGPN intends to actively invest in and continue to build this programme over coming years.

Thank you for your interest in and support of this important initiative.

Esther Maxim
Programme Manager
The New Zealand Rural General Practice Network
Students of Rural Health Aotearoa
“I found this really inspiring and it makes me consider health careers as an option which I hadn’t really thought too much about before. It was good to hear that once you get into Health you have a range of career paths you can take.” The medical students were all passionate about what they were doing - they were all happy and positive about their futures. It was great to be around other young people who feel that way about life,”

Molly Macpherson, pupil, Darfield High School