

Issue

Farmers and their families are also health consumers. Poor access to health services remains a predominant concern for members. For this reason, combined with the fact that rural and remote Australians have poorer health than their metropolitan counterparts¹, the Association is committed to addressing the rural health challenges facing members.

Rural Health Services

- The Association works closely with a range of rural health organisations in an attempt to develop a more comprehensive approach to addressing the ongoing provision of rural health services.
- Arguably the biggest challenge facing rural communities from a health perspective is the attraction and retention of appropriately skilled health workers, ranging from GPs to Nurse Practitioners to Allied Health Professionals. The Association is also extremely concerned by ongoing closures of rural hospitals and/or specialist units such as obstetrics and oncology.
- The Association is seeking a collaborative approach towards rural health infrastructure and service delivery solutions, including (but not limited to) more appropriate investment in rural health infrastructure; increasing students' rural exposure through rural clinical placements; improving access to rural health training and education in rural areas; and utilisation of incentive programs across all health disciplines.
- The key findings of the Australian Medical Association's *Rural Health Issues Survey*, released in May 2007, regarding the urgent need for better resources for rural hospitals and the need for consistent national assessment for overseas trained doctors highlight common areas of concern for Association members. The other findings regarding the funding of rural locums, updating equipment in rural hospitals, and improved support and opportunities for doctors in training are also consistent with the rural health concerns expressed by members.
- The Association has a long history of involvement in issues pertaining to the NSW Patient Assisted Travel Scheme, known as the Isolated Patients Transport and Accommodation Assistance Scheme (IPTAAS). Most recently, this has taken the form of a detailed submission in response to the *Senate Inquiry into the Operation and Effectiveness of Patient Assisted Travel Schemes* and targeted lobbying as part of the 'Less Distance for Assistance Alliance'. The Alliance's lobbying resulted in improvements to the IPTAAS eligibility criteria and a small improvement to the vehicle allowance, however, there are a range of outstanding issues, many of which were the subject of recommendations made through the abovementioned Senate Inquiry.
- These issues will be discussed at a Rural Doctors Association of Australia Rural Health Workforce Roundtable meeting with the new Federal Health Minister 19 February 2008. The Chair of the Association's Rural Affairs Committee, Alan Brown, will be participating in the meeting.

Mental Health

- The mental health and wellbeing of rural and remote communities remains of utmost concern to the Association. The Association's Rural Mental Health Network – a group of key stakeholders who work together to address rural and remote mental health issues across NSW – has been instrumental in providing a collaborative environment in which to address rural mental health issues.
- The Network has developed the *NSW Farmers Blueprint for Maintaining the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the People on NSW Farms*. The Blueprint is a simplified summary of key issues that need to be addressed and outlines the major actions that need to be taken to address rural mental health priorities.
- The Association received a one-off grant from the NSW Government in 2006 in order to improve the availability of Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) courses to rural communities of NSW. During 2006 and 2007 the Association worked with the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH) to plan, deliver and evaluate 12 of these MHFA training programs in rural and remote localities across NSW.
 - The Association is hoping to extend the success of this program by seeking the development and implementation of 3-hour Mental Health Information Sessions aiming to provide farmers and farming service providers with information about common mental disorders, strategies to help people with these and appropriate local referral options.
- The Rural Mental Health Network is next meeting in Sydney 19 February 2008.

Dental Health

- Members are expressing growing concerns about the extreme shortage of rural dental services across rural and remote NSW and have given the Association a mandate to actively pursue more rural dentist services, particularly through rural scholarships.
- Rural and remote communities have less access to preventative care, leading to dental experiences tending to be 'emergency' eg teeth are being extracted rather than filled.
- The Association regularly meets with the Australian Dental Association to discuss rural dental health concerns and recently participated in the Legislative Council Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Dental Services in NSW.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2005). Media release "Poorer health, higher risks outside major cities" 13 May 2005.