

BUSH SOLUTIONS TO HEALTH WORKFORCE MALDISTRIBUTION

Australia's vital rural health training providers today welcomed the announcement that Assistant Rural Health Minister Dr David Gillespie will meet with them on Monday at the Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN) regional meeting hosted by the University of SA Department of Rural Health based in Whyalla, South Australia.

Each of ARHEN's member 12 University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) from across Australia will be in attendance. High on the agenda are discussions on how to increase student accommodation infrastructure in the more remote regions so more health professionals can be trained in the bush.

Dr Gillespie is the guest speaker at the ARHEN meeting.

Over the past 20 years, UDRHs have developed academic units in and for the remote and rural regions which in turn are growing the remote and rural health workforce through multidisciplinary education and training. They provide clinical training and clinical placements in remote, rural and regional locations for medical and health science students such as nursing, midwifery, dental, pharmacy, psychology, mental health, dietetics, social work, podiatry, speech pathology, exercise physiology and physiotherapy. UDRHs are also involved in research, innovative education and health service models and health professional support.

The positive impact of the UDRH program across Australia was recognised with a doubling of funding announced in the Government's 2015 MYEFO for expanding nursing and allied health clinical placements.

"ARHEN members are now planning how to best use the increased funding to further expand the opportunities they provide for medical and health science students from universities around Australia to rectify the remote and rural health workforce maldistribution," ARHEN Board Chair Professor Sabina Knight said.

"High quality student accommodation and teaching facilities are key to this, but remain a challenge for many UDRHs, especially those operating in remote locations such as Karratha WA, Mornington Island Qld, Brewarrina NSW and many others. Housing stock and leasing options are often limited or simply not available in these locations."

"Research shows that when students train in rural areas they are more likely to return to practice and live there" Prof Knight said.

The Turnbull Government announced during the recent election campaign that it would establish a Rural Health Commissioner to improve access to health services for the 7 million Australians who live outside capital cities.

Prof Knight welcomed Dr Gillespie's recent comments that part of this new role would focus on developing the first ever national rural generalist pathway to increase the number of highly skilled GPs in these locations.

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“Healthcare is provided by teams of health professionals and the Rural Health Commissioner is likely to be interested in the multidisciplinary healthcare issues that are critical to ensuring the best outcomes for bush patients who so often can’t access services that people in cities take for granted.

“It’s clear that the chronic maldistribution of health professionals affects the overall health status of people living rurally.

“ARHEN is committed to working with the Assistant Minister and the new Rural Health Commissioner to build on the knowledge and expertise developed by UDRHs and Rural Clinical Schools to find sustainable solutions to further improve the lives of people living in the bush.”

Prof Knight is also Director of the Mt Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health.

No appointment to the role of Rural Health Commissioner has yet been made.

The ARHEN meeting, which includes the 12 UDRH Directors, is being held until 20 September.

Rowan Ramsey MP, the Member for Grey which takes in Whyalla, is also attending the meeting.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Prof Sabina Knight: 0417 823 933