

The National Rural Health Students' Network—pursuing passion and professional development

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¹National Rural Health Students' Network

Francesca Garnett is a fourth year medicine/arts student at UNSW and Co-Chair of the NRHSN for 2010. She shares her passion for rural, remote and Indigenous health by encouraging health students of all disciplines to have experiences in rural areas. She has just completed a research year in Indigenous child health and hopes to continue this interest into her future practice.

Recruiting health students to work in rural and remote areas needs to inspire students to go to the bush, but it also needs to provide them with the skills to succeed when they get there.

The National Rural Health Students' Network (NRHSN) acts to address both these aspects of rural health recruitment to produce a group of students who are both passionate about rural health and confident in their abilities to live and practice in the bush.

As the evidence suggests that students from rural backgrounds are more likely to return to rural areas (WHO, 2010), the NRHSN runs rural high school visits to promote health careers to rural students all over the country. At these visits, university students doing all different health courses give high school students a glimpse of what university life is like, as well as informing students about the different pathways to get into health courses and scholarships for rural students. The trips also give university students the chance to get to know country towns and show them how diverse these can be.

The other way the NRHSN targets school students is through participation in Indigenous health festivals, such as Wakakirri, Deadly Days and Vibe Alive. At these festivals we talk with younger students about healthy lifestyles and about different health professionals through activities and role-plays. We also talk to the older students about health careers, including Indigenous entry schemes and scholarships. Students going to these festivals also get a chance to explore the community, which might include going to the local health centre and community events that are on during the time of visiting. This allows the students to get a feel for working in these areas once they graduate.

Once students get into health courses, our rural health clubs at universities provide support them in their studies, by providing a meeting point for everyone who is interested in rural health. As a new student, particularly one who may have to move to the city for studies, meeting other students who are experiencing the same things as you makes the transition to university much easier. The clubs are also places where many students make firm friends, and these networks are invaluable as students graduate and have already formed support networks as they move into the rural workforce.

The NRHSN also promotes rural careers to metropolitan students because we think rural practice is so fantastic that everyone should try it. To inspire students to consider rural health, the NRHSN clubs run a number of events aimed at introducing students to the country, such as Campfire, RAW, RAW Vigour and Midnight Muster. These events give students a glimpse of life in the bush by taking them out of the city and introducing them to a community and some of its rural health professionals. This allows them to experience both the professional aspects of rural health and the lifestyle opportunities available.

While producing students who are passionate about rural health will get students to the bush, they need more than just passion to keep them there. Providing opportunities for professional development and equipping them with the knowledge of what to expect while students are still at university means that when they go to rural areas students are able to hit the ground running, and reduces the stress of relocation.

This is particularly important when recruiting students from metropolitan areas, as the prospect of going rural can be daunting if students do not feel equipped to cope with the professional and personal challenges associated with moving away from the city. Providing training in areas such as mental health first aid and

cultural awareness is crucial for students to feel comfortable when faced with the larger scope of rural practice.

Providing students with leadership skills specific to rural areas also helps dispel the myth that going rural will hinder their career prospects by highlighting the huge scope of careers in rural Australia and the opportunities for professional development. Hearing from a diverse range of rural leaders and events such as the National Rural Leadership Development Seminar allow students to see that rural practice will give them skills to enhance their careers, and demonstrate how engaging and exciting a career in rural health can be.

Reference

WHO 2010. Increasing access to health workers in remote and rural areas through improved retention: Global policy recommendations. Geneva: World Health Organization.