

The Health Careers in the Bush program—encouraging Queensland’s rural and remote secondary students to pursue careers in health

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Francine Riley is the Senior Project Officer for the student initiatives team at Health Workforce Queensland.

Fran manages the Queensland Rural High School Visits program as part of the Health Careers in the Bush Alliance. She coordinates an average of seven road trips in Queensland per year, which are facilitated by members of the four Queensland Rural Health Clubs. They visit approximately 30 rural and remote secondary schools per year and over 400 secondary school students.

She also works closely with the Rural Health Clubs in Queensland (BUSHFIRE, HOPE4HEALTH, RHINO and TROHPIQ) to assist them to achieve their objectives of promoting rural health care to their members. She facilitates several activities for the club members, including the annual Joint Rural Health Club Weekend, member attendance at the Rural Doctors Association of Queensland Conference and opportunistic attendance at Health Workforce Queensland’s medical education workshops.

Fran has represented Queensland’s Rotary District 9600 in a group study exchange with Southern Africa’s Rotary District 9210. On this seven-week exchange, representing Health Workforce Queensland, she was able to further her understanding of international health disparities for rural and remote populations and those of developing countries in Africa.

Fran has also recently travelled to America to present at a national conference about the Queensland Health Careers in the Bush program. She was also able to learn more about health career promotion activities for underserved and minority populations in several western American states.

Introducing Health Workforce Queensland

Health Workforce Queensland is the Rural Workforce Agency for Queensland supported and represented by Rural Health Workforce Australia. We are a not-for-profit Agency funded primarily by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing and there is an Agency in all the States and Territories in Australia except for ACT.

Health Workforce Queensland’s primary objective is to facilitate the recruitment, retention and quality of general medical practitioners and primary health care teams in rural and remote Queensland communities.

To facilitate this objective, our diverse range of teams work across a spectrum of **Attraction, Recruitment** and **Retention** services. This paper will concentrate on one program under the attraction phase. Specifically, the Health Careers in the Bush program and our role within this state-wide initiative.

Introducing Health Careers in the Bush

The Health Careers in the Bush (HCB) program is a Queensland based program of activities and resources designed to help rural and remote secondary school students pursue a career in the health industry. The underlying principal of the program is to increase the number of rural origin students entering a health career and returning to rural and remote Queensland to practice their profession.

The HCB program is coordinated by an Alliance of organisations. Six of these organisations manage different aspects of the program:

- Queensland Health’s Cunningham Centre—Health Career Workshops
- Health Workforce Queensland—Rural High School Visits and Resources
- The 4 Rural Health Clubs in Queensland—Rural High School Visits

This presentation will touch only briefly on the Health Career Workshop series managed by the Cunningham Centre. The main focus will be on the Rural High School Visits program and Resources that are managed by

Health Workforce Queensland's Student Initiatives team and the 4 Rural Health Clubs in Queensland: BUSHFIRE (Bond University); HOPE4HEALTH (Griffith University), RHINO (James Cook University) and TROHPIQ (University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology).

Health Career Workshops

The Health Careers in the Bush residential Career Workshops have been managed and facilitated by Queensland Health's Cunningham Centre for secondary school students from rural and remote Queensland since 1994. The purpose of these workshops was to provide these students with an opportunity to gain further insight into life as a health practitioner.

History

From 1994 to 2010, the Cunningham Centre (in conjunction with the now superseded Queensland Health Regional Training Units) have coordinated approximately 3 to 5 workshops annually in Brisbane, Toowoomba or Townsville. These were categorised into three separate groups—years 9/10, years 11/12 and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students. Workshops were promoted to all rural and remote secondary schools in Queensland and each workshop accommodated 20 to 30 students. Over the last 16 years, over 1,500 rural secondary school students have participated in a fun, informative and comprehensive program to learn more about the specific aspects of practicing as a health professional.

Format and outcomes

During a 4 day workshop, the group of students would participate in a full program of educational and social activities. This included tours of hospitals, job-shadowing and participating in informative small group lessons from a variety of health professionals. Participants would also receive tours of local university campuses and university accommodation while also learning more about entry requirements and specific course content.

By attending a Health Career Workshop, students were able to gain an insight into the daily activities and scope of work for health professionals such as Dentists, Dental Technicians, Emergency Physicians, Occupational Therapists, Pathologists, Emergency Nurses, Cardiac Nurses, Radiographers, Speech Pathologists, Orthopaedic Surgeons and Podiatrists, just to name a few!

Past research

In 2004/2005, a research project was conducted by the Centre for Rural and Remote Area Health that examined the pathways of students who had participated in a Health Careers Workshop between 1994 and 2002. Seventy workshop attendees participated in the project with 90% of respondents either employed in the health industry or studying to do so.

Participants responded that 'self interest' was the most important contributing factor for why they choose a health pathway. 'Attendance at a Health Careers Workshop' was the next highest contributing factor. This reflects the nature of the workshops being attractive to students who were already considering some sort of career in the health industry.

However, attending the workshop allowed students to gather more specific information about the variety of careers and, in many cases, make a decision on which pathway to follow. Sixty-four of the 70 respondents said that attendance at the workshop helped them decide on a specific pathway out of several options they were considering prior to attending.

The future

The traditional format of the Health Career Workshops will be changing in 2011. This change will be managed by Queensland Health's Cunningham Centre and is a result of a changing landscape of education opportunities and the need to create new ways of engaging students effectively in health promotion activities.

Another activity to plan for in the future is undertaking a second formal research project into the Health Career Workshops. This would be a valuable activity to undertake to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and the rate of return to the rural workforce of past participants. However, at this time, it has not been pursued due to time and financial constraints.

Rural High School Visits

The HCB Rural High School Visits (RHSV) program is managed and coordinated by Health Workforce Queensland and the 4 Rural Health Clubs (RHC) in Queensland. Health Workforce Queensland coordinates members of the RHC's to participate in road trips to rural and remote Queensland communities where they engage with secondary school students in interactive sessions. Topics discussed include career options in health, the realities of life at university, financial support and how to survive living away from home.

The goals of the Rural High School Visits program include:

- Illustrating the wide variety of health careers available
- Breaking down perceived barriers such as
 - I need an OP 1 to get in to any health course
 - I can't afford it
 - I couldn't move away from home
 - It's all about blood
 - I have to go to uni to be in health
 - I won't fit in or make friends
- Demonstrating that working in health is fun, rewarding and presents many opportunities

Each RHC in Queensland and Australia is required to conduct promotional visits to rural schools under their funding parameters from the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. In Queensland, the existence of the HCB program creates a mutually beneficial opportunity; Alliance members can participate in positive workforce recruitment strategies and the RHC's can meet their funding requirements and participate in a valuable and worthwhile activity.

History

Since 2003, RHSV teams have completed over 200 visits to rural and remote Queensland secondary schools and promoted careers in health to over 3,000 students. Health Workforce Queensland liaises with all targeted schools, coordinates the itinerary, promotional resources, equipment and logistical arrangements for the RHC teams. We also provide training, conduct evaluations and work with the RHC team to create and present an interactive and informative session at the schools. We have worked with the RHC's to develop their RHSV portfolio's, market the opportunity to their members and include RHSV's as a popular and important inclusion in their annual calendar of events.

Format and outcomes

RHSV teams are multidisciplinary teams of 4 or 5 students. They travel by car on 4 or 5 day road trips including Sunday as the first travel day. The number of schools visited varies depending on how remote the trip is. On average, 5 to 8 schools can be visited over the 3 to 4 'school days' they travel.

Team members arrive at the school and conduct a session that involves both an interactive presentation and a hands-on skills component. Typically sessions are 1.5 hours long and occur during school hours. We are flexible to adapt to the needs of the school and their timetable for that day. Session times have varied from 30 minutes to 2 hours and we have presented during class periods or during lunch breaks.

In each session, the team presents an emergency scenario to the school students. Generally the injuries of the patient require them to see many health professionals from emergency to rehabilitation. The school students are tasked to think of as many health professionals as they can that would help this patient on their road to recovery. This activity provides a fun start to the session and creates an interactive and relaxed atmosphere. The RHSV team would then fill in the gaps and offer other career options in health that students may not have considered.

RHSV team members also connect with the school students by talking about their personal experiences in their pathway to health. Team members may be from a rural community themselves and have experienced the steps involved in surviving at university. They may also be scholarship holders, or have followed an 'untraditional' pathway into their current course. By telling these stories to the school students, they make a connection and hopefully motivate them to pursue a health pathway. The school students feel 'if they can do it, so can I'.

Furthermore, each session includes at least 30 minutes of hands-on practical skills. Equipment included in each visit is provided by Health Workforce Queensland and is adapted by the RHSV team to match their individual skills. The equipment kit can include items such as plastering materials, stethoscopes, reflex hammers, triangular bandages, strapping tape and pen lights. Team members can also contribute items relevant to their discipline such as diagnostic and management tools used by students of speech pathology, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

Planning

Due to the geographical size of Queensland and the distribution of over 250 secondary schools across the State, the HCB RHSV program can not visit every school, every year. Health Workforce Queensland maps the historical data of schools visited since 2003. This presents an effective planning tool at the beginning of each year as we target communities that have not been visited for several years. Unfortunately, there are also some schools which have still never been visited (under the HCB program) and we work to include these in future itineraries.

The HCB program targets schools in ASGC-RA 2-5 primarily. However, as the new classification system has opened up many more communities to work within, we attempt to coordinate itineraries to cover the more rural and remote communities first. Therefore, many visits are conducted in RA 3-5.

Other benefits

Not only are there benefits to the school students that are gaining a more thorough understanding of health career options, but these visits also benefit the RHC university students who facilitate them.

Since 2010, we have attempted to add extra value to this activity for the RHC facilitators who conduct the visits. We have pursued opportunities for the RHC facilitators to meet with local health professionals while they are visiting Queensland's rural communities.

The opportunity is investigated once the school visits itinerary is confirmed as the primary goal of the itinerary is to reach as many schools as possible. Therefore, a meeting with local health professionals will be adapted around that objective and may be an early morning tour of the hospital, a barbeque lunch or a social dinner at a local establishment. This value-added activity presents another element of rural health exposure to the RHC members that complements their current course of study and rural exposure experienced through university curriculum.

Evaluations

A final element to the RHSV's program is evaluations. We collect three streams of evaluations from school students, school staff and the RHC facilitators.

The RHSV program is designed to be complimentary to other career promotion activities and rural education the school and university students experience over time. Therefore, evaluations for the RHSV program are not designed to investigate if students or facilitators actually decided on a career in rural health due to their participation.

Overall, school students indicate that they have "learnt new things about the types of jobs available in health care" while also learning new things that may help them decide what to do once they leave school. Students also have the option of signing up to our ENewsletter to continue to receive career information. While more data will be presented at the 11th National Rural Health Conference, I have included some testimonials below which indicate the affect of the RHSV session on students.

When asked “I learnt ...”

Health care has a lot more to it than what I thought.

How to immobilise a snake bite.

There are many different scholarships available.

I learnt that OP doesn't hold your whole future.

When asked what they enjoyed or appreciated from the session ...

How they told us what it was like at uni, I feel now like I'm more motivated for my future career

The fact that we were able to interact, and actually get involved with the plastering and blood pressures.

It has helped me decide some subjects I might want to study.

It explained all the missing links from personal experiences of the people.

I liked when we got to hear about the different ways to get into a health career. I also liked hearing about scholarships.

When asked to suggest improvements ...

It should be longer, so as to incorporate more information.

Making the sessions longer and more hands on activities.

Evaluations received from the school staff members indicates they believe promotion of health careers is important and they believe their students benefit from the visits. We also received suggestions for improvements and comments on the resources provided for students and schools.

Our students have very little knowledge of the diversity of the roles within health. I think it's fantastic for them to hear about people other than doctors and nurses as this is the extent of knowledge for some of these students. I have taken part in this program twice now and I think it's brilliant for rural teens.

Many thanks for the information—as I also teach careers and am looking for relevant data—I appreciated the resources.

The audio, visual, kinaesthetic approach meant that all students were well catered for regarding learning styles

As a teacher I would put students into groups and rotate these groups and presenters. Smaller groups [are] more effective.

...Include a quick description of UMAT and GAMSAT. Loved their youthful enthusiasm

It is a positive experience for students in rural schools to meet and talk with students who are currently engaged in study and training. Not only can they share information about courses, careers etc but living arrangements and other life skills associated with studying away from home.

Next time I would like to see our year 8's invited to the workshop. What about year 7 students? They would love the hands-on activities and the interactive presentation. The younger they are the more impressionable they are.

Maybe keep it to yr 10-12. Younger students will soon forget the relevance.

Facilitators for RHSV agree that participating in the visits benefited them in many ways. We received comments on improving the presentations and resources as well as positive comments on the training provided prior to the visits.

When asked what they enjoyed about the training and then conducting the visits ...

Coming together to discuss our approach and including the experience of those who have previously been involved.

I have thoroughly enjoyed participating in these visits and found them to be very personally satisfying. The ability to educate students on occupational therapy with no prior knowledge was most beneficial.

Confidence in leadership skills, personal growth and getting to meet many new people...

Allowed me to see what careers rural kids are interested in and the different issues they have compared with city kids i.e. long distance from home, financial constraints, traditional roles.

Miles hospital visit was fantastic. Staff were extremely generous and caring—I am keen to return for a placement there

Allowed me the opportunity to see parts of rural Australia and engage with students and health care staff from those areas.

When asked for suggestions for improvement ...

Year 11 and 12 students were very interested in our presentation. The younger years couldn't think that far ahead when deciding future careers

More stethoscopes, BP cuffs, tuning forks and anatomy (neuro, cardio, resp, renal), less focus on plastering—fun but labour intensive

When coordinating the RHSV program there are many factors that contribute to the way the session unfolds in reality and the consequent feedback received. Factors include open or closed communication channels within a school, personal opinions of what is valuable to school students, the culture at the school, the distribution of student grades and ages, the training received and absorbed by the RHSV team, the composition of the RHSV team (ages, experiences, disciplines) and even weather events.

These factors result in variations in the session and the perception of the experience from team to team and school to school. While training is provided to each RHC, we also try and encourage them to take ownership over their presentation and composition of the session. Therefore, we must adopt a balance in developing a program that is flexible and relevant to each team and education region, while also providing an effective formula that has previously worked to engage school students.

The future

We are continually working on improving the RHSV program while also working with the school system and not attempting to present a 'one-case-fits-all' session. We will adapt training and delivery methods to utilise modern technology while being sensitive to the needs of rural schools. We will also continue to present up-to-date and relevant resources for career information.

Queensland's Health Careers in the Bush—Rural High School Visits program unifies the RHC's in Queensland to promote careers in health to our rural school students. Health Workforce Queensland centrally coordinates all school visits under this program and in doing so we are able to deliver a professional, streamlined and high quality service to our rural schools and communities across the State. We are committed to providing rural and remote secondary students and staff the opportunity to understand more about following a pathway in health.

Resources

Health Careers in the Bush manages a suite of informative resources that contain information on careers in health such as:

- profiles on over 25 different careers
- courses available in Queensland
- entry requirements and pre-requisites
- scholarships and financial assistance
- alternative pathways
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support
- links to training organisations and other career resources
- links to the Queensland Rural Health Clubs.

This information is updated yearly and is presented via a number of formats including a printed A4 booklet, an online scholarships database, a CD, 3 promotional videos and a comprehensive website that contains all the information in user-friendly, printable brochures. www.healthcareersinthebush.com

We have also developed an ENewsletter that is distributed to school students, staff and other stakeholders. This includes information on scholarship application dates, traineeships, videos that depict a 'day in the life' and links to other career promotion websites. We would also like to include interviews and testimonials from past workshops and RHSV participants about their career pathway journey.

All Rural High School Visits and Career Workshops provide tangible booklets and CD's for participants to keep. However, in maintaining an up to date and very comprehensive website, as well as distributing the ENewsletter, students and staff are able to continue to access high quality and relevant information regardless of our ability to physically reach them.

The Health Careers in the Bush future

Health Careers in the Bush will continue to operate in Queensland and provide encouragement and support to rural and remote secondary school students to follow a career pathway in health.

We will continue to annually update our resources and provide new contacts, links, and information about health career promotion initiatives. We will introduce new training methods for RHSV teams and ensure we utilise feedback received to portray relevant information and provide the right support for both facilitators and schools.

We will continue to grow the involvement of local health professionals and community members in the program and strengthen the reputation of Health Careers in the Bush in rural Queensland.

Furthermore, we hope to conduct formal research surrounding past participants of Health Career Workshops to investigate their pathway and possible return to the rural health workforce.

Conclusion

Health Careers in the Bush is an effective strategy to raise the awareness of the opportunity to pursue a career pathway in health to rural and remote secondary school students.

Health Career Workshops increase students' knowledge and understanding of the day to day activities and lifestyles of health professionals. The students are able to narrow down their options and choose a pathway that is right for them.

Rural High School visits engage school students with the facilitators who are young and relevant to their generation. The facilitators can provide up-to-date and pertinent information on what it is like to study, live away from home and what to expect when working as a health professional. The school students feel more positive about their options and motivated to follow a pathway they may not have previously believed possible.

