

## Rural health education initiatives to be heard in Canberra

21 MARCH 2012, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA – – Peak body, the Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN), will this week present two of its key priorities at a meeting with federal MPs in Canberra.

ARHEN plans to use Wednesday's meeting to lobby for both a new, innovative clinical training model and an Oral Health Academic Program. Both initiatives would be implemented through the University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) network, which ARHEN represents, and provide a much needed expansion of health services in rural and remote communities.

The clinical training model would see a staged rollout by UDRHs of a new approach to the delivery of nursing and allied health clinical training that aligns student placement programs with local areas of need. The model, based on service learning principles, requires the development of strong partnerships with community organisations and local service providers and is expected to result in both improved community access to health care and enhanced student learning.

Chair of ARHEN, Professor David Lyle, notes that service learning has proven successful in Broken Hill where it has evolved since 2008.

"The service learning model has been developed and trialled by the UDRH in Broken Hill where we have seen tremendous results," Professor Lyle said. "The quality of clinical education has improved and so too has training opportunities for health students in the Broken Hill region."

A case study examining Broken Hill UDRH's experience with service learning demonstrated that the approach can result in improved community access to healthcare as well as enhanced student learning.

"Not only does this model provide accessible, high quality, community-orientated health services in a socio-economically disadvantaged and underserved community, it also complements the Australian Government's investment in medical student training through the Rural Clinical Schools Program. Everybody wins here."

The second initiative proposed by ARHEN is the Oral Health Academic Program. This ambitious program would see the expansion of public dental and oral health services in remote and rural areas while providing increased opportunity for the supervision of oral health students, including final year dental students.

Building on the service learning model, this approach aligns student placement programs with areas of local health need. It does so through partnering with groups such as State Health, the private sector, as well as local organisations and service providers.

Once established, the new program would provide a foundation for future developments in remote and rural areas of the oral health workforce, extending beyond dentists to include dental hygienists, dental therapists, oral health therapists and dental prosthetists.

Professor David Lyle, Chair of ARHEN, is all too aware of the gap between rural and urban Australia when it comes to dental and oral services, but believes that access to services would be improved by this UDRH delivered program.

“There are three times as many dentists practising per capita in major cities compared to remote areas,” Professor Lyle noted. “And the maldistribution of the dental workforce can impede timely and affordable access to services for groups such as remote and rural, and Indigenous people. This new program should go some way towards solving this problem.”

ARHEN are confident that the initiatives would be successful as UDRHs have a track record for enhancing and expanding the health services workforce in their communities, particularly through multidisciplinary education and training, and clinical placements for students.

### **About ARHEN and UDRHs**

Established in 2001, the Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN) is the peak body for the 11 University Departments of Rural Health (UDRH) located in every state and the Northern Territory.

UDRHs are focused on expanding and enhancing the rural and remote health workforce through multidisciplinary education and training, research, professional support and service development. UDRHs are well established, diverse and complementary, forming the most significant rural health academic collaboration in Australia. The program which is funded by the Commonwealth is highly regarded and highly successful.

ARHEN strives to lead and initiate the rural health agenda in the areas of education and research to improve rural health.

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If you'd like more information about this item, or to schedule an interview with ARHEN National Director, Janine Ramsay, please contact 02 6282 2166 or email [Janine.Ramsay@arhen.org.au](mailto:Janine.Ramsay@arhen.org.au)