

Student report

Genevieve Commins¹

¹Deakin University

In April I was given the wonderful opportunity to attend the 12th National Rural Health Conference—theme, ‘Strong commitment. Bright future’—in Adelaide. This is the major interdisciplinary conference in the field of rural and remote health, and is held biennially. As signalled by its theme, the conference carried a message of hopefulness (and urgency), and was a great environment for inexperienced people like myself to get ideas and reflect upon what to do with one’s energies and ensuing professional life. This conference also had a friendly, collegiate nature, and a sense of industry and collaboration. It was a chance for corroboration between students and experienced professionals, from a great range of fields, with a view to planning for the future and appraising developments in health over the past few years. Adelaide experienced lovely weather over the few days, and the venue allowed a pleasant view of the Torrens amid the bustle between concurrent sessions and a vast array of arts projects, knitting and juggling people, poems and photographs of rural life.

The NRHC was attended by a number of students, some of whom I had met through my university’s rural health club and others via previous conferences and the RAMUS program itself. The event ‘Comfortable Chairs’ held on the Tuesday evening was a colloquium between students (‘future leaders’) and current health leaders in various fields. They compared views on a number of topics, such as Indigenous health, rural general practice, specialties, nursing and allied health. I enjoyed the mixing of vivacity and wryness in this session, and there were a number of quotes gathered from the ‘current leaders’ which I will store away and revisit: they were both sensible and moving. The conference dinner on Monday evening was a joyous event, with a lot of luridly cheerful colour and a very entertaining band which was thoroughly danced-to. The next morning, students enjoyed a recovery breakfast upon the river, which launched us into the day revived and ready to listen to a wide variety of excellent speakers from all around the country.

The NRHC contained a strong thread of arts and health in its program. I was particularly interested in this content, having a background in the humanities. Concurrent sessions included some fascinating papers on the use of arts and media to promote health, and to educate and foster a sense of community and connectedness. I was also delighted by a series of presentations on humour in mental health, storytelling and community, and the incorporation of play into rural paediatrics. These topics reminded me of the role creativity plays in health, and the potential for exploration of this in research. I expect that this rich seam of health research, originating within rural communities themselves as well as in academe and the clinical environment, will orientate us toward greater recognition and support of existing strengths within communities, as well as toward making working life more enjoyable. Plenary sessions at the conference also emphasised creativity and media as powerful resources which can, with good telecommunications, open up new roads in rural activism and self-expression.

Plenary sessions at the conference were held in the enormous halls of the Adelaide Convention Centre. These gave an update on progress as well as areas of stasis in rural and remote medicine since the previous conference. I was taken by Dr Tom Calma’s message of perseverance, and his eloquence on the topic of supporting existing mental health and other initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It was a reminder that agitation for change and the production of new initiatives must not ignore or destabilise what is already being achieved. This was consistent with COAG Reform Councillor Sue Middleton’s words on data collection and appraisal, and the importance of careful evaluation before true improvements in services can be achieved. I also enjoyed the playfulness of James Fitzpatrick and Tanya Lehmann in their performance of ‘The Wand and the Whip’ highlighting the tension between idealism and prudence; the hopeful and hard-nosed. They suggested that these attributes may be mutually accommodating.

Finally, I was also lucky to attend a pre-conference workshop on writing for publication, held by the *Australian Journal of Rural Health*. This was a very practical session which afforded a number of tips on getting one's ideas into the public domain, with a reminder of the process of scientific enquiry and the essential aims of research, its incremental expansion. A number of people at various stages in their research were present, and I found discussion with them very interesting and motivating.

In sum, the 12th NRHC in Adelaide was an uplifting and edifying experience, which I am very grateful to have been able to attend through the generosity of RAMUS. I met a variety of very interesting people and found a wealth of material, in the realm of current ideas and initiatives in rural and remote health.