

Student report

Thomas Kavanagh¹

¹Monash University

As a 4th year medical student in my second year of the RAMUS scheme I had the opportunity to attend the 12th National Rural Health Conference in Adelaide SA. As part of Monash University's Extended Rural Cohort I have spent the all of my clinical placements so far in regional areas and have a strong interest in the development of rural health. I saw this conference as an opportunity to gain more insight into the current issues and developments in rural health and to contribute in some way to the future of rural health.

The NRHC is the largest rural health conference held nationally with over 1,000 delegates from different health care disciplines. Over the four days during the plenary and concurrent sessions a range of speakers told stories, shared experiences, debated and discussed how they could improve health care for their fellow rural Australians. Dispersed amongst these formal sessions were numerous opportunities for networking, socialising and sharing of stories amongst the delegates. There was an exhibition hall with a number of organisations promoting their services and resources. The program was jam packed full of great activities, one of the highlights being dinner on the Monday night, a great opportunity to get to know fellow conference goers and make new friends as well as catching up with old friends.

The theme of this year's conference was 'strong commitment, bright future' and this was immediately evident in all the delegates' enthusiasm and convictions about improving health care outcomes for rural Australians. The plenary and concurrent sessions covered a wide range of topics within rural health.

The opening session's star attraction was the Tutti Community Choir—an inclusive choir based in Adelaide who performed a number of songs. This was an inspiring performance and the talent and enthusiasm of the members was fantastic.

There were a number of sessions focusing on the National Disability Insurance Scheme and how it needs to be taken advantage of in rural health care and the numerous benefits it could have for people with a disability in the bush. Generally I came out of these sessions optimistic about the impact this legislation will have. I was glad to have the opportunity to learn more about it.

A big highlight for me was the session on Tuesday night called 'Comfortable Chairs' which took the form of a game show pitting the current leaders in rural health against future leaders—students attending the conference who have taken on leadership roles in various student organisations. After three days of hearing all about the great things being done, I felt somewhat daunted about my role in the improvement of rural health and what a big task it seemed to be able to contribute meaningfully. It was fantastic to hear some inspiration from the old hands and the enthusiasm from the fresh new students. The thing that I found most moving was the words of reflection by the current leaders about their time in rural practice. One in particular I think rang very true and illustrated why people at this conference are so devoted to their communities: 'Rural communities have been described as fishbowls—I enjoy swimming in mine because in that bowl are townspeople who mobilise to fill the church then the hotel to mourn and celebrate the death of a young bloke killed instantly by machinery at a local quarry, who help each other recover from a devastating flood, who gather around a dying person and their family—cooking meals and making scones, drinking tea and an ale or two. Even better in this fishbowl there are no traffic jams or road rage.'

Most of all I enjoyed meeting other members of the NRHSN and RAMUS. The social events and which brought all the students together allowed us to get to know and share our experiences with one another. I look forward to meeting these colleagues again at future events and in our future careers in rural health. Particularly the RAMUS lunch was a great opportunity to meet and catch-up with other RAMUS scholars and alumni, as well as Susan and the rest of the hardworking RAMUS team. It was

great to once again see the people behind all the emails and correspondence and to give them a heartfelt thank you for all the opportunities that the RAMUS program offers me, a sentiment shared by all RAMUS scholars I am sure.

The National Rural Health Conference was an enormously valuable experience, it was an inspirational and thought provoking event which I thoroughly enjoyed, and go away from with a new passion and enthusiasm for my career in rural health.