

★ Outback Intern Pharmacist Training Program: a future in rural and remote practice

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Rural workforce shortage has been on the lips of pharmacists for many years. Despite increases in pharmacy graduates, those willing to venture outside metropolitan areas is still few and far between.

The Mount Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health (MICRRH) is a university department of rural health with a focus on supporting a rural workforce development. MICRRH delivers a supported Pharmacy Intern Program to promote a stronger rural pharmacy workforce. For those unfamiliar with pharmacy curriculum, the general pathway is a 4 year undergraduate degree followed by a one year Intern year of supervised practice before registration. During this year there are assignments, a written examination and an oral examination. All Intern pharmacists must complete a prescribed Intern training program through a pharmacy organisation such as the Pharmacy Guild or Pharmaceutical Society of Australia. The MICRRH program is entirely separate, its an additional support for the Interns and is provided at no cost to the Interns or Pharmacists.

In Mount Isa it was identified that pharmacy intern recruitment was inhibited due to 3 main barriers; the high cost of accommodation, social isolation and lack of professional support.

The MICRRH Intern Program provides pharmacy interns with heavily subsidised accommodation to make living in a rural area more affordable. The average wage of an intern pharmacist is \$736.00 per week before tax. And the average rent for a 1 bedroom unit is \$250.00-\$300.00 per week. Meaning a significant proportional of a wage would be spent on accommodation. This combined with the high cost of living was a major barrier.

Social isolation is often a perceived barrier that results from metropolitan student's being unaware of the immense sense of community that is the backbone of rural areas. Students who have undertaken rural placements have shown to have an increased interest in working in rural and remote areas compared, to those who have completed only metropolitan placements.¹ This is fair, you cant expect students to love a place they have never been to. However, addressing the stigma is difficult from a distance and thus student placements remains major entry point of pharmacy graduates into the intern program. On average 60 percent of Interns in the last 3 years of the program had undertaken a pharmacy placement with MICRRH.

Professional support is the major component of the Intern program. The term Rural Generalist Pharmacist is emerging and I think this is a true professional title of those working in rural and remote pharmacy. However our pharmacy graduates aren't trained at the generalist level, and instead it's a skills set that is developed by pharmacists with robust initiative working in remote practice. To aid the development of the Rural Generalist Pharmacist the Intern Program has a major focus on Multidisciplinary approaches to health care. As a Pharmacy Graduate, and even after a few years experience, the role of allied health professionals was a vague world.

Intern sessions are held fortnightly for a 2 hour period. For each multidisciplinary session, the Interns meet with myself and a member of an allied health setting. Other sessions are less innovative, yet still essentially important and usually involve examination preparation.

The allied health practioners are asked to present to the students, about their role, what a patient would expect in an appointment with them, present a case study and referral pathways. In return for their teaching, the Interns are asked to present back to the allied health staff about a pharmacy related topic relevant to their practice. For example; the physiotherapist would get a short presentation on the role, risks and place of anti-inflammatories, opioid analgesics and neuropathic pain medications. This is of course negotiated with the allied health member to ensure they are learning about something of interest to them.

These sessions provide an interactive, participatory teaching and learning opportunity. The sessions are designed to promote open discussion and practical information sharing with the aim to better prepare pharmacists to work in a rural multidisciplinary team. An additional benefit of these sessions is that allied health practitioners are upskilled on medications relating to their field and the role of the pharmacist in a multidisciplinary team.

Some examples of health professionals that have been involved in the program include; occupational therapists, psychologists, general practitioners, nurse practitioners- specialising in renal, cardiac or diabetes, physiotherapists, incontinence advisors, dementia advisers, and aboriginal health workers just to give you an example of the breadth of the program.

You might wondering, does this investment translate into an improved Rural Pharmacy Workforce. And yes, proudly, it does...

Over the last 2 years, there have been 5 pharmacists complete the MICRRH Intern Program. All 5 of these Interns registered as pharmacists and have been retained is practicing pharmacists in an area equally or more remote than Mount Isa.

Year / Location of Intern Year	Year / Location of 1 st Year Pharmacist	Number of weeks of placement with MICRRH
2013 – Mount Isa	2014 – Mount Isa	Nil
2013 – Mount Isa	2014 – Weipa	4 weeks
2014 – Mount Isa	2015 – Charters Towers	4 weeks
2014 – Mount Isa	2015 – Mount Isa	3 weeks
2014 – Mount Isa	2015 – Mount Isa	Nil
2015 – Mount Isa	2016	
2015 – Weipa	2016	4 weeks
2015 - Karumba	2016	6 weeks

These pharmacists have provided feedback indicating that this program fills a gap in their training and that they have an enhanced understanding of the roles, function and capacity of allied health professionals. The pharmacists practice demonstrates a recognition of the importance of networking with allied health teams and improved confidence to integrate as a pharmacist into multidisciplinary teams to improve patient outcomes.

"MICRRH's intern program is a well rounded support for intern pharmacists. as it afforded us an opportunity to network with local health professionals and GPs, provided learning experiences unique to rural health care, provided support for examinations and a team of professionals working within the industry to mentor and support in all our learnings. I would definitely recommend it to all budding pharmacists." – Kosar Latiff 2013 Intern Pharmacist

To summarise the MICRRH Intern Program highlights the importance of multidisciplinary teaching and learning models. The intern year is an ideal time for pharmacists to create professional networks and better equips pharmacists to work in outback multidisciplinary healthcare teams as rural generalist pharmacists.

Recommendation

Funding streams should consider supporting a multidisciplinary Pharmacy Intern year to improve the quality of pharmacists working in rural and remote Australia.

Presenter

Selina Taylor's role at the Mount Isa Centre Rural and Remote Health (MICRRH) has opened up multiple opportunities for her. She has developed the MICRRH Intern program to provide rural Intern pharmacists a supported year of learning and immersing themselves in the community. She also coordinates pharmacy student placements in and around the region to remote areas such as Karumba, Normanton, Longreach, Winton, Camooweal, Boulia and Cloncurry. The student

placements generally involve an experience of a few facet of pharmacy including a Community Pharmacy, Hospital Pharmacy, and Outreach/Remote Pharmacy as well as HMR/RMMR experience. This allows the students to see first-hand the opportunities and challenges rural pharmacy can present. Student support is also high on the agenda for Selina. She is currently mentoring 2 young Mount Isa women who are studying pharmacy at JCU. Providing mentorship for local students whilst they are studying helps students remain connected to their home town and keeps them involved in what happening with local health and pharmacy issues while they're studying at university. Selina's passion for rural and remote health shines through in her enthusiasm, and in her encouragement for students and pharmacists to enjoy the vast opportunities that North West Queensland has on offer.