The Victorian Rural Community Intern Training program

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The Rural Community Intern Training (RCIT) program provides medical graduates with an opportunity to commence their post graduate training in rural Victoria and provides the foundation for a career in rural practice, particularly in general practice. Additionally, intern participation in the RCIT program in Victoria provides a pathway into the Victorian General Practitioner – Rural Generalist program.

As is the case in other Australian jurisdictions, the general practitioner (GP) workforce in rural and regional Victoria is the primary medical workforce in subregional health services, local health services and small rural health services. While Victoria has an adequate supply of GPs in metropolitan areas, there is a significant issue with maldistribution of the GP workforce, contributing to GP shortages across many rural areas in Victoria.

Although, the provision of primary health care, including the education and training of general practitioners is a Commonwealth responsibility, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (the department) recognises the important complementary role of the general practitioner in the Victorian public health system. The department funds a number of rural medical workforce programs that support the development, recruitment and retention of a skilled general practice workforce for rural and regional Victoria, one of which is the RCIT program.

The RCIT model is based on providing interns with exposure to a wide range of clinical experiences that emulate the practice of a rural general practitioner both within the hospital system and in community settings. Intern placements are based in small rural and sub-regional hospitals with core and non-core rotations to larger regional hospitals, general practices and community settings. The program is designed to create a strong basis for a rural medical career whilst also developing skills transferrable to any setting or practice.

The RCIT program began with the development of the Murray to Mountains intern program in 2012 and was subsequently expanded across the state in 2015. A total of 35 intern positions are now available across five region specific programs across Victoria. The five RCIT programs are:

- South West Community Intern program (South West region of Victoria)
- Grampians Rural Community Intern program (Western region of Victoria)
- East Gippsland Community Based Intern program (South East region of Victoria)
- Murray to Mountains Intern program (North East region of Victoria)
- Echuca Intern Network (North West region of Victoria).

In late 2016 the department commenced a 3 year evaluation of the RCIT program. The primary purpose of the evaluation is to determine the extent that the objectives of the RCIT program are being achieved. The first round of evaluation data has demonstrated that the program is on track to deliver against its objectives.

Former RCIT interns rate the program very positively as a platform for achieving their career objectives, with 86 percent of the 2016 intern cohort and 100 percent of former interns rating the
program as either a very good platform or a good platform. Amongst the benefits to organisations, Positive contribution towards creating a pipeline of rurally-based doctors and Improved service delivery were the most nominated by respondents (88 percent and 85 percent, respectively).

Across all stakeholder groups, the level of overall satisfaction with the RCIT program experience was very high, with between 91 percent and 100 percent of respondents indicating they were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience of the RCIT program.

Additionally, the evaluation has incorporated methods of active participation with stakeholders through an innovative approach to organisational self-assessment. Rather than stakeholders only providing data, they also actively participate in developing quality improvement plans to create a better and more sustainable program for the future medical workforce in Victoria.

Presenter

Tarah Tsakonas is a Senior Policy Advisor for the Victorian Government Department of Health and Human Services. Part of the Medical Workforce team, Tarah works in rural medical workforce policy and training programs. Tarah has worked in various aspects of rural health, including the implementation of a national telehealth project, developing national education programs for rural GPs and broader rural priority skills campaigns. She has recently been involved in research on rural health workforce capacity issues, including lifting accessibility constraints for rural GPs in undertaking mental health training and current postgraduate research on the accessibility of regional sexual and reproductive health services has expanded her focus on addressing disadvantage.