Motivations and concerns of younger optometrists choosing rural practice

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Optometrists are relatively widely distributed in rural Australia. Each town or city of population 7000 or more can support one practice. They provide a local ophthalmic resource that works very effectively with GPs and nurses to provide ongoing care for persons at risk of refractive error, eye disease and reduced vision. Many rural optometrists are approaching retirement age, and there is no secure process of succession planning in place.

Forty-nine younger optometrists were identified in practices located in rural areas of NSW. They were invited to participate in an informal survey of factors that motivated them to choose rural practice, and whether there are any major issues that could be addressed by policy change. Nine responses were received (18% response rate).

Important themes were identified in their responses.

• Positive trends and motivating factors:
  - graduates of rural origin are more likely to choose rural practice
  - rural location is an opportunity to open an independent practice
  - all responders appreciate the opportunity for a broad interesting scope of practice and dealing with friendly appreciative patients
  - a positive rural clinical placement experience during undergraduate education has drawn some city-based graduates into rural practice
  - a significant number of graduates of metropolitan origin see rural practice as a temporary opportunity to gain experience for a few years, but their ultimate intention is to return to city practice. A number of these have changed their mind and decided to remain in rural practice.

• Deterring factors:
  - lack of social interaction with peers of similar age and interest
  - need to travel long distances to gain a social life and interact with relatives and friends, and to attend continuing professional education events
  - a perceived lack of quality high school education opportunities is seen as a major factor motivating return to more urban locations as children approach high school age
  - lack of available specialists to refer patients needing cataract surgery, and ophthalmologist care.
The need to secure a sustainable rural eye health workforce should be addressed by implementation of policy that attracts optometrists to rural regions and ensures positive experiences. Appropriate policy changes might include increased opportunities to support students of rural origin, continuation and expansion of rural clinical placement scholarships, and special program funding to state education authorities to establish high-quality selective schools in key regions.