What the rural health indicators are indicating for New Zealand

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In 2010, the New Zealand Institute of Rural Health (NZIRH) commenced a three-stage research project to develop a national collection of rural health indicators related to the health status and health services for rural people in New Zealand compared to those people who live in urban centres under the three broad headings of health status, determinants of health and health system performance.

Health status of rural people has been of interest in recent years to researchers, industry groups, health service providers and health service funders. There have been many attempts to delineate rural health from urban and to drill down into further data for subsets of rural communities. Specific dimensions of health status are health conditions, human functions, wellbeing and deaths.

The development of the rural health indicator framework will enable high-level measurement, assessment and comparison of the health status of urban and rural New Zealanders and the measurement of disease and health trends of rural communities. Tatua Kahukura: the Maori Health Chart Book and the AIHW rural health indicator framework have been the sound footing for developing a set of rural health indicators for New Zealand.

The next two decades will bring growing numbers of older people in both rural and urban communities. Independent urban areas are projected to be home to an even larger proportion of older people aged 70 years and over (21 per cent) than highly rural/remote areas and rural areas with low urban influence (15 per cent). Age-related projections differ dramatically by ethnicity. The European population is facing a much greater increase in proportions of older people than are the Maori and Pacific populations, which will continue to have larger proportions of children. New Zealand is experiencing the unpredictable effects of a worldwide economic recession. This has affected, among other things, the country’s gross domestic product and levels of unemployment, which have the ability to influence the health status of New Zealanders.

The interrelationship between health status, determinants of health and health system performance is often questioned within and on behalf of rural communities; this piece of work offers a strong basis to compare relevant data and make national comparisons in this area.

This paper will briefly describe the development of the indicators and move on to a discussion of the key learning from this work and the future application of the data for health-sector planning.