The changing face of the Victorian rural GP

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Annually, our organisation undertakes a General Practitioner Workforce and Skills Survey. The information provided is used to assist in identifying the critical recruitment, retention, professional development and support needs for GPs in rural and remote Victoria.

In this presentation, we plan to show some of the key changes that have taken place over the past five years in the characteristics of the ‘average rural Victorian GP’.

Each year, we send a hardcopy questionnaire to around 1600 rural Victorian GPs, collecting information about their qualifications, experience, practice location, workload and personal characteristics. Response rates are supported by a follow-up survey and a round of phone calls to non-responders. By feeding back our results to participants, we are able to establish strong working relationships with local medical professionals and demonstrate our commitment to research in rural health.

This project aligns with the conference’s focus on quality quantitative data and previously unpublished research in the field of rural health. Our findings show that over the past five years that this survey has been conducted, the characteristics of the average Victorian rural GP have changed. Longitudinal data show an increase in the intake of female GPs into the workforce over this time. Over the same period, the proportion of male GPs decreased from 70% to just over 65%. For those aged 35 years and under, we now see an approximate 50/50 split between both genders—which demonstrates that gender distribution/balance has improved over time. The average GP has also reported a deduction in the hours worked, with practising GPs now working around 1.6 hours less per week than in 2007. Demographically, we have also noticed a substantial increase in the number of overseas-trained doctors—in 2011, 46% of the workforce were reported as graduates who obtained their qualifications overseas.

By collecting information about the skills and personal characteristics of Victoria’s rural GPs, trends can be analysed and future changes predicted. For example, the ability to predict movements within the current workforce allows us to identify potential areas of workforce shortage, as indicated by GPs.
approaching the average age of retirement or expressing a desire to significantly reduce working hours in the future. In this case, policy makers can take steps to mitigate these risks.