Hearing impairment (full or partial hearing loss) is a relatively hidden condition in rural Australia, where farmers in particular have high rates of impairment due to unprotected use of farming machinery and other occupationally related causes. People who lose hearing capacity as they age tend to neither see themselves as disabled nor to link into support services. But although it is a significant issue for about five per cent of the population, it is not a health issue that features high on health service or government agendas.

This presentation will describe the strategies used in a 2012 project to increase awareness among rural health professionals through joint action with rural Medicare Locals (MLs). The findings will have relevance to organisations seeking to implement change in other important health areas via the new vehicles that are Medicare Locals.

The National Relay Service (NRS) is an Australian Government program that provides a phone service for people with hearing and speech impairments to have effective social, business and health care phone calls via third-party relay officers. It is a valuable tool for reducing social isolation among older people affected by hearing impairment. Health professionals in primary health care are influential in fostering use of the NRS among older people, but the NRS is conscious that knowledge about hearing impairment and relay calls among these providers is typically low.

The project systematically liaised with all MLs in operation for more than six months. MLs were typically open to discussions on the issue and a diverse range of strategies was jointly developed to raise awareness within the sector. In rural Australia, these varied from distributing regular brief communication items (via e-newsletters etc), to educational sessions for practice nurses to running booths at agricultural shows to developing an innovative online learning module. The NRS also commissioned data from the ABS to feed into the ML’s population health planning.

This presentation will share the findings of the work and the lessons learnt, and assess the potential of rural Medicare Locals to collaborate on such projects. The presentation will conclude with both practical and policy recommendations.