From urban to rural—Townsville–Mackay Medicare Local

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**Introduction:** With the health reform introduced in 2010, the then Townsville General Practice Network (TGPN) became Townsville–Mackay Medicare Local (TMML). One of the most challenging tasks before TMML was engaging and becoming a useful service provider for our members in rural areas. This was extensive as every area outside of Townsville (where TGPN had previously concentrated) was considered to be rural.

**Method:** The implementation required significant changes to the TMML board structure, communication systems, program delivery and our understanding of what our new rural members needed and wanted. Firstly, we had to increase our capacity to deliver services, so TMML more than doubled its employee base in 2011–12. At end of June 2011, there were 64 staff/38.48 FTE, which expanded to 127 staff/90.15 FTE at 30 June 2012.

The population health unit (PHU) was developed and implemented in late 2011 so TMML could gain an understanding of its population needs. This included gathering data from numerous sources, conducting community, stakeholder, health professional and consumer consultation and collating all the information into a comprehensive document. The PHU now has a ‘snapshot’ of each town/area in TMML, giving information about demographics, health needs and outcomes, health services and consultation. Any gaps in services are also recorded in these documents.

Monthly program development meetings are held by team leaders to allow strategic planning based on evidence supplied by the population health unit. Population groups or geographically defined communities are systematically reviewed to ensure our future programs are meeting the needs of the entire region, in particular our diverse rural communities. The outcomes of this planning process are annual plans for each program area.

**Summary:** The last 12 months has been a roller-coaster ride for the health system with many areas still to be decided and finalised. TMML (previously TGPN) has been working through the minefield to develop the best plans for delivery of its services to its members, particularly rural members who are now a large part of TMML’s ‘work’.