Key lessons in implementing a rural GP spouse mentoring program

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Aims: While a multitude of programs focus on retaining rural GPs, few give this same focus to their life partners. Yet research confirms that spouse orientation to rural life plays a major part in GP decisions to remain in rural practice.

To investigate the retention potential of this largely unexplored group, in 2011 the NSW Rural Medical Family Network (RMFN) established the Bush Friends Mentoring Program to match individual GP spouses newly arrived in rural NSW with experienced rural spouse ‘mentors’. The program utilised a previously untapped resource (experienced rural GP spouses who already have many skills), and targeted a largely forgotten group (newly arrived rural GP spouses).

The Bush Friends approach, while largely new, is constantly evolving, delivering critical methodology lessons on the way. This paper will identify and discuss the key learnings harvested to date.

Method: With no prior programs to model upon, Bush Friends adopted an action research approach where consistent monitoring and program participant feedback is used to refine the program model. Consequently, the personalised contact with newly arrived spouses has risen from 64% to 98% of all arrivals, and a myriad of design benefits have been realised.

Relevance: Australian rural GP spouses continue to influence GP retention rates across the nation. Well designed and implemented programs targeting spouse retention may hold a previously unexplored key. Albeit in its infancy, this program shows enormous potential in NSW, and with changes to suit different environments, offers that potential to other states and territories.

Results: Just one year after inception, it is not yet possible to demonstrate a link between a successful ‘transition to rural life’ and the mentoring received through this program, nor a longer term influence on GP retention.

However, alterations in methodology have produced remarkable benefits for program uptake by both mentors and mentees, as well as benefits for all program participants. For example, the initial structured method of recruiting and training mentors, based largely on approaches popular in industry, has mostly been abandoned in favour of lower key initial ‘triage’ contact with newly arrived spouses followed, if required, by an informal contact from the nominated mentor.

Conclusion: Bush Friends will continue into its second year in a highly modified form, aiming for contact with 100% of newly relocated spouses. It will continue to grow and evolve methodologically. The key to successful longer term outcomes lies in using an action research approach and continually refining strategies as they evolve with experience.