Will recent funding initiatives impact on recruitment and retention rates of allied health professionals and nurses in rural and remote Australia?

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The recruitment and retention of allied health practitioners (AHPs) and nurses in rural and remote areas of Australia is problematic. Policy makers face significant challenges trying to meet the health needs of rural and remote Australia by providing access to trained health workers. A shortage of qualified health workers in remote and rural areas impedes access to health care services for a significant percentage and often disadvantaged section of the population.

In 2012, the Rural Workforce Agencies received funding from Health Workforce Australia under the Rural Health Professionals Program (RHPP). The RHPP is designed to affect recruitment and retention rates by ‘growing and supporting an allied health and nursing workforce for rural Australia’. The RHPP supports Australia’s rural and remote health workforce by recruiting new international and Australian-trained allied health professionals and nurses into rural and remote areas of Australia, and into Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services. Significantly, it then provides them with appropriate support services over a two-year period to improve retention rates.

There has been a plethora of research investigating the factors associated with recruitment and retention of health professionals, and there is now evidence for AHPs and nurses specifically in rural and remote areas, including a workforce retention framework. It is paramount that the research, evaluation of existing service providers, and current frameworks and tools are considered so that a raft of strategies required to enhance the recruitment and retention of allied health professionals and nurses in rural and remote areas can be designed. The choice of interventions to be included as part of the RHPP roll-out in Queensland will be informed by an in-depth understanding of the health workforce and an analysis of the factors that influence the decisions of AHPs and nurses to relocate to, stay in or leave rural and remote areas. Giving due consideration to this will help to ensure the choice of services provided to AHPs are anchored in and tailored to the specific needs of the individual, their profession and their location.

This presentation aims to summarise the available evidence on factors that influence recruitment and retention of allied health practitioners and nurses in rural and remote Australia, and strategies that have been developed to address them. It will then articulate how the program will be implemented in Queensland in accordance with available evidence, and provide some recommendations for the continuation of the program.