

SUNNY DAYS IN ADELAIDE – BRIGHT FUTURE FOR COUNTRY HEALTH

Delegates in Adelaide at the 12th National Rural Health Conference have reconfirmed the sector's commitment to a bright health future for rural and remote areas and some of the means by which it will be achieved.

Minister Plibersek gave the closing address to the Conference and was present to hear an overview of the priority recommendations agreed by delegates.

The seventeen priority recommendations fall under four themes: infrastructure, clinical care, workforce issues and targeting chronic disease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations.

Some very contemporary prospects relating to the cost of high speed broadband in rural and remote areas caused significant alarm among those at the Conference. This specific matter will no doubt be the subject of immediate advocacy but, more importantly, the leaders of the sector who were meeting in Adelaide have agreed on the medium and long-term strategies for better health and wellbeing which will continue to drive the sector for as long as it takes to achieve good health for people throughout rural Australia.

A huge range of factors were considered by delegates speaking in concurrent sessions and by invited speakers in plenary. Dougie Herd charmed and informed delegates with his explanation of the state of play with the National Disability Insurance Scheme, while Robyn Brogan inspired her listeners with guidance about how end-of-life care can and should be provided.

Considerable attention was given at the Conference to the role to be played now and in the near future by technology. Delegates were as one in seeing telehealth as an adjunct to and facilitator of local health services, not a replacement. The Conference gave policy as well as practical support to the electronic health record, with over 200 people signing up to it in NEHTA's booth which was part of the extensive exhibition at the Conference.

The lengthy corridors of the Adelaide Convention Centre provided ample space for both exercise and informal networking, some of which saw old and new friends exchanging views on how the sector is going to take maximum advantage of this year's Federal Election to influence those other corridors – of power – in State capital cities and Canberra.

The particular challenges faced by communities and individuals in remote Australia were a particular focus, with both a concurrent session and a plenary address from Jan Ferguson. In relation to this issue, as to many others, one of the issues considered by delegates was whether it is now time to seek 'seismic change' in governance and programs of such areas, rather than gradual shifts.

Overall, Conference delegates continue to show the patience and persistence which has characterised their sector for many years and which has certainly been reenergised by this exemplary biennial event.

The NRHA, organisers of the Conference, made widespread use of Twitter in the lead up to and during the event and, as an organisation, has undoubtedly crossed the communications Rubicon.

The strength of this biennial Conference owes much to its ongoing support from sponsors who, for Adelaide, included the SA Department of Health, NEHTA, ANU's APHCRI, the Toowoomba Hospital Foundation and HESTA. The Department of Health and Ageing provides the core ongoing support for the NRHA.

One of the strategic developments agreed for improving quality of life and service delivery across the board would be to have more 'place-based' programs in areas like education, economic development and family and community services. The Medicare Locals, of which a great is expected, were given strong support at the Conference and will hopefully be a model for how such a place-based approach can work – in their case, in the health sector.

As ever, the Conference included an extensive range of arts and health activities which provided what MC Leigh Radford, from ABC Rural Radio, described as "the fascinating light and shade" of the event. Delegates celebrated the closing session in style with a music ensemble, Woden Valley Youth Choir, and a report from the Australian Bureau of Worthiness about what it is that 'makes the day' for people in rural and remote areas.

The Conference community was delighted to be able to welcome nine of the past and present chairs of the NRHA who exchanged wise saws and gallantries with an equal number of rural and remote health leaders of the future. A substantial part of the energy in the Convention Centre was provided by the 80 or so students from a range of health disciplines who attended from around Australia.

Thanks to the energy of the more than one thousand people who attended the Conference and the ongoing support for the cause provided selflessly by so many people who actually live and work in rural areas, this Conference has undoubtedly Strengthened Commitment to a Bright Future for rural and remote communities and the health of the people in them.

More information on the Conference can be found at **www.ruralhealth.org.au**

