Delegates hear how to resource rural and remote areas – and you can too

Resources for Rural and Remote Areas was the topic of one of yesterday’s plenary sessions at the 12th National Rural Health Conference in Adelaide. The presentations can be streamed on-line today at the NRHA website.

Rob Oakeshott, Independent Member for Lyne, is well-known for his advocacy of Governments adopting place-based models of service delivery to give local people engagement and authority over their own lives. “Early community engagement will ensure sustainability and bring improvements in the social determinants of health,” he said, emphasising the importance of community-government-business partnerships. He credited the government for doing some things well, including caring for individual rights (for example through progressive taxation and the safety net) and providing data relating to population sectors (for example, in industry and for population groups). However, he reminded delegates there is much work to be done in the area of providing equitable resources for various geographical locations.

In Australia we have strong relationships between income, place and infrastructure – all adding up to the situation in which the social determinants of health are often worse in rural and remote areas. “The development of a social disadvantage index is an important area of work,” Mr Oakeshott said. He encouraged delegates to take advantage of the political process to help right rural and regional injustices.

Paul Rosair, Director General of the WA Department of Regional Development and Lands, provided an outline of the benefits to rural and remote Western Australia from the Royalties for Regions program.

He outlined a small number of the very many programs funded by the program, in areas like responding to health, educational or business emergencies in Aboriginal communities. “Many of the programs have what Mr Rosair described as “an intimate connection to the health and wellbeing of rural and remote communities”. He briefly described the $311 million Ord East Kimberley Expansion Project - jointly funded with the Commonwealth - and the $1.1 billion Pilbara Cities Initiative. “The aim is to build leadership capacity in the community and to encourage the residents to want to continue to live there,” he said.

Royalties for Regions also funds a Country Age Pension Fuel Card for pensioners in rural areas who are not able to access the free public transport scheme available to pensioners in Perth. The social, family and health benefits to older people of this modest initiative are enormous.

Jan Ferguson, Managing Director of Ninti One and CRC for Remote Economic Participation, focused on remote areas - 85 per cent of the nation’s land mass with just three per cent of the population. Dr Ferguson described positive ways of responding to what she termed “desert syndrome”, attributable to such things as distance from markets, and from economic and political decision-making, lower education and employment, and low critical mass of population. Developing partnerships is a means of overcoming the disadvantage associated with low critical mass and is a useful strategy for addressing many of the consequences of the failure of governments to properly manage and govern remote areas.

These and other keynote presentations at the 12th Conference can be viewed on-line at www.ruralhealth.org.au