



Communiqué 13th National Rural Health Conference

The people, places and possibilities that will help improve health and wellbeing for rural and remote Australians

Australia's passion for improving the health and wellbeing of rural and remote people was on full display with over 1,100 delegates attending the 13th National Rural Health Conference in Darwin.

The four-day biennial event, held this year at the Darwin Convention Centre from May 24 to May 27, attracted more than twenty well-respected and high-profile keynote speakers from across the health sector.¹

Delegates were pleased to hear from Senator Fiona Nash, Assistant Minister for Health, and a longtime supporter of rural health. The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, addressed the Conference briefly via video-link, demonstrating the level of commitment the Australian Government has to addressing the challenges in rural and remote health.

The Shadow Assistant Minister for Health, Stephen Jones, outlined how federal Labor, if elected, would work to improve the health and wellbeing of rural and remote Australians. And Northern Territory Minister for Health, John Elferink, outlined some of the recent successes his government has had in improving the health of Territorians.

Delegates heard from speakers working in a wide range of areas outside the health sector, including Bruce Bonyhady, Chair of the National Disability Insurance Agency; Megan Davis, Director of the Indigenous Law Centre at the University of New South Wales (UNSW); Kathy Burns, Artistic Director of Barkly Regional Arts; and Julian Disney from the Social Justice Project at UNSW.

Many delegates travel thousands of kilometres to attend and are always keen to hear from keynote and concurrent speakers working in the health sector. For many, it is one of the only opportunities to learn about the great work others are doing to improve the health and wellbeing of rural and remote Australians.

¹ Their presentations can be streamed on demand from the NRHA website.

This year, for the first time, the National Rural Health Conference looked beyond Australia's shores and hosted several sessions with an international focus. The aim was to help foster better collaboration between health leaders in Australia and countries in our region. Despite the differences between our countries, health workers dedicated to rural and remote health across the region have much in common. For example they all work in resource-constrained environments. As a result, they are often the people with the most innovative solutions to longstanding problems. The conference was pleased to facilitate an opportunity to share lessons and innovations across countries in our region.

As at previous National Rural Health Conferences, the arts and health program was an outstanding success, thanks largely to the work of Kieren Sanderson. Highly acclaimed local artists, including Shellie Morris, the Gunga Weavers from Arnhem Land, photographer Luke Arkapaw, Rayella Band from Marlinja Community, and survivors of torture and trauma from the Melaleuca Refugee Centre, entertained and inspired conference delegates.

Although it required an extra level of commitment, many delegates also attended one of the 13 pre-conference events on offer. These included meetings about the roll-out of the NDIS in remote areas and training in rural emergency skills. Others opted for a bus tour to Nauiyu community to learn more about remote Aboriginal communities; or learned how to become power 'tweeters'.

Once the Conference itself began, delegates worked hard, making over 340 recommendations for improving the health of people in rural and remote Australia. Ten priority recommendations eventually emerged, all of them tangible suggestions as to how governments – both federal and state – can improve rural and remote health. Among them was a call for a Senate Inquiry into food security for remote communities; the development of a digital inclusion strategy for remote Australia; a proposal for a National Rural Health Workforce Strategy; and the urgent call for a funded Implementation Plan for the National Aboriginal Health Strategy. Others included calls for further action: to improve the health of children in rural areas; on the eye health of Indigenous people; and to expand access to Medicare-funded services in rural and remote Australia.

The National Rural Health Alliance was proud to facilitate such an important conference on behalf of the sector. It would have been impossible without the generous support of the conference's Principle Sponsor, the Northern Territory Government, its Chief Partner (the Royal Flying Doctor Service) and its twelve other supporters.

After the event the conference community left with renewed vigour for their work. Armed with a set of agreed priority recommendations, the sector will continue to work towards, and advocate for, better health and wellbeing for rural and remote Australians.