What do Gen Y health students want? A presentation of the outcomes of the 2007 NRHN Forum

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Introduction

The National Rural Health Network (NRHN) represents 19 Rural Health Clubs with approximately 5000 members located at universities throughout Australia. The NRHN is a multi-disciplinary network representing medical, nursing and allied health students aiming to increase the health workforce and health outcomes for rural and remote Australians.

The National Rural Health Network is supported by financial assistance from Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and the Australian Rural and Remote Workforce Agencies Group (ARRWAG) proudly auspices the NRHN.

At present, the rural health sector faces immense challenges in terms of workforce and as such there have been a number of changes over the past few years. In considering these and further changes, three key themes remain pertinent to the future rural health workforce—quality, flexibility and support.

Quality

This is perhaps the easiest and most obvious for consideration. It encompasses 3 aspects—teaching, placements and post-graduate opportunities. Teaching needs to be undertaken by the best quality staff and in ways that provide the students with the best basis from which to pursue their career. Students value shared learning experiences and thus would like to see inter-professional education explored as a pre-graduation learning option. Placements must also be taught by quality teachers who are themselves offered adequate educational support. They need to have the time to be able to give students as much practical expertise as possible so that once graduated, the students can participate from day one of their new career. After graduation however, education does not stop. Students need the certainty that they will be allowed post-graduate training options no matter where they practice.

Flexibility

Generation Y is very different to preceding generations. Concepts of work–life balance are particularly important. Work hours and training will need to take issues such as family, holidays and travel into account. Furthermore there is likely to be a large increase in the numbers of professionals working part time, the practicalities of which cannot be accommodated by traditional working practices. Multi-disciplinary teams working in integrated service models are the likely solution. This health care team concept was a major theme of the forum with students feeling empowered and excited by the prospect. As an aside it must be emphasised that such a team approach to education will require the commitment not only of the students, but also training providers, governments and the broader communities within which they operate.

Support

Support is crucial for students both while they are on campus and during placements. This extends to students from all health courses who experience barriers to undertaking rural placements—namely financial and logistical. The forum brought out these issues and hopefully with the publishing of the NRHN placements guide these issues may begin to be addressed. The 2007 NRHN Forum also saw the public launch of the NRHN mental health guide When the Cowpat Hits the Windmill. The Forum focused on mental health and thus it was excellent to be able to hand out such a useful resource to all
students in attendance. Finally students also raised the issue of support for partners, family and relationships when they go to work in rural areas.

**The road forward**

Above all there must be increased consultation linked with firm action on areas that are to be addressed. This will involve government, professional organisations, universities, workforce agencies, other training providers and students. Only with increased communication and a willingness to consider novel approaches to health care delivery will there be a smooth transition to a predominantly Generation Y workforce.

For more information on the NRHN and its activities, please visit [www.nrhn.org.au](http://www.nrhn.org.au).