Australian Physiotherapy Association
Member Body Report to CouncilFest

Rural Members Forum of the Australian Physiotherapy Association

The APA has approximately 4,500 members living and practicing in rural Australia today. This equates to approximately ¼ of the national membership. All of these practitioners are considered members of the Rural Members Forum (RMF) however they are represented by individuals from each jurisdiction selected to come together to address key issues of importance to rural physiotherapy on behalf of the Association.

The issue of adequate representation for such a large number of rural practitioners has been an on-going concern for the Association. It is no easy task to represent such a large number of people from a very diverse range of practice settings and social contexts. In the past the RMF has comprised one representative from each jurisdiction. Now the Association is seeking broader representation with greater numbers of participants coming together for meetings and teleconferences and forming working groups on key issues for rural practice. This process commenced in September 2012 with a face-to-face meeting in Launceston and is still being refined to ensure the best form of representational structure is in place.

Key issues for the broader Association over the past 12 months have included the following:-
- Extended scope of practice
- Physiotherapy specialisation
- Medicare Local development and physiotherapy
- Models of practice engaging physiotherapy assistants
- Development of Reconciliation Action Plan for engagement with Indigenous Australians

Key issues for the RMN are not dissimilar and have included:-
- Rural generalism and the notion of a rural physiotherapy context specialist
- Course work in preparation for rural physiotherapy practice
- Indigenous health and access to physiotherapy services
- Mal-distribution of physiotherapy workforce with smaller per capita rates of registered physiotherapists in rural/remote practice. Related to this issue is the theme of market failure for private physiotherapy practice in some rural and most remote areas and the need to support viability of private practice in rural Australia

There are obvious synergies between these activities and the priority work of the NRHA. Both organisations are keen to reduce mal-distribution of the health workforce and to improve access to health service for rural Australians. Both are vitally interested in the future development of the Medicare Locals system, particularly as this might relate to the local planning of future services, the development of workforce, and the provision of effective training and support of health practitioners in the bush. In addition both entities are committed to improved focus on preventive activities and a greater capacity for health promotion in the workforce.

The Rural Members Forum and the Australian Physiotherapy Association value the NRHA as an important alliance in advocating for the health of rural Australians and a constructive influence in national debates in key health issues and the reform agenda. To this end we are keen to engage with the Alliance on such issues as e-Health, Medicare Locals, efficient Hospital care, workforce restructure and extended scope of practice, Indigenous health improvements, and the priority of effective team and multi-disciplinary practice for good health outcomes. On some of these matters it will be important that the APA make its own representations in relation to rural health, but on many others the broader voice of the Alliance will be a logical spring-board for bringing about necessary change.