National Rural Health Alliance CouncilFest 2014

Member Body Report for the period November 2013 to September 2014

Name of member body: Rural Health Workforce Australia
Delegate to CouncilFest: Jo-anne Chapman, General Manager Programs

1. Brief overview of the membership and vision of the member body

Rural Health Workforce Australia (RHWA) is the national peak body for Australia’s network of state and territory Rural Workforce Agencies. We are committed to making healthcare more accessible for the people of regional, rural and remote Australia by providing a skilled workforce that meets communities’ health care needs.

Our not-for-profit network does this by attracting, recruiting and supporting appropriately qualified doctors and other health professionals to work in regional, rural and remote areas. Our member agencies are the NSW Rural Doctors Network, Rural Workforce Agency Victoria, Health Workforce Queensland, the Rural Doctors Workforce Agency in South Australia, Rural Health West in Western Australia, Northern Territory Medicare Local, and Health Recruitment Plus – Tasmania.

RHWA is also committed to Australia’s future health workforce through our management of the National Rural Health Students Network (NRHSN), which represents 28 university Rural Health Clubs around Australia.

2. Reports of important personnel changes or other administrative matter.

Mr Greg Mundy was appointed as the new CEO of RHWA in May 2014. Greg joins RHWA after three years as CEO of the Council of Ambulance Authorities, the peak body representing providers of public ambulance services in Australia and New Zealand. Prior to this, Greg was CEO of Aged and Community Services Australia.

In January 2014 Mr Toby Langdon was appointed to the newly created position of Evaluation & Data Manager, reflecting RHWA’s commitment to workforce program evaluation and ongoing improvements to data collection.
3. **Major activities for the Member Body in the previous 10 months, including motions, projects and events relating to the interests of the NRHA.**

Over the past 10 months, RHWA and our network of Rural Workforce Agencies have continued to deliver on core programs including:

- the recruitment of nearly 300 GPs to regional, rural and remote Australia
- the provision of over 700 locum support services
- fellowship exam support to hundreds of rural and remote GPs
- family and practice support
- over 10,000 specialist and multidisciplinary outreach services

In late 2013 RHWA, in conjunction with the RWAs, launched the Dental Relocation and Infrastructure Support Scheme (DRISS, see NRHA Partyline, August 2014, pp 6-7). This Department of Health-funded initiative provides relocation incentives and infrastructure support grants to dentists who relocate to provide general dental services in regional and remote locations. The third DRISS funding round will open in mid-September 2014.

In May 2014 RHWA commissioned the University of Queensland’s Institute for Social Sciences Research to undertake a large qualitative research project into the decision-making processes when considering relocating to a rural or remote location. The study is being conducted amongst Australian-trained medical students and junior doctors in Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide. The findings from this research are due in November 2014 and will be used to:

- develop marketing materials for our attraction and support activities;
- better target communications to different market segments; and
- identify optimal strategies to engage with junior doctors

4. **Some reference to areas of mutual policy interest for the Member Body and NRHA.**

Over the next 12 months, the following issues represent RHWA policy focus areas of relevance to the Alliance.

**District of Workforce Shortage, Area of Need and ASGC Remoteness Area Classifications**

RHWA continues to advocate for more transparent, equitable and nationally consistent geographic classification systems which impact on issues such as the eligibility and distribution of workforce incentive programs, return of service obligations for Bonded Medical Students, and an excessive administrative workload for health professionals, practices, RWAs and other agencies.

**Data and evidence, improving data collection**

Obtaining accurate and detailed data about GPs working in regional, rural and remote Australia is a vital component of evidence-based healthcare needs
assessment and planning. For more than a decade, Rural Workforce Agencies have been contracted by the Department of Health to collect a Minimum Data Set on the GP workforce in their respective jurisdictions. RHWA collates and publishes these datasets at a national level. A Network Data Group with representatives from each RWA meets quarterly to discuss the Network’s data and research program.

**Greater community involvement/ focus**

Our Network of jurisdictional Rural Workforce Agencies facilitates working with communities to address local health needs. RHWA believes that the complexity and diversity of issues in rural and remote Australia means that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not always optimal. Health workforce solutions often require to be tailored to specific circumstances, necessitating an understanding of local issues, community consultation and input.

**Development of the future health workforce**

RHWA is committed to growing the Australian-trained regional, rural and remote health workforce. The National Rural Health Students Network (NRHSN) currently has over 9,000 multidisciplinary health professionals with an interest in rural health. Over the past 6 months RHWA has invested in a new database for the NRHSN which will allow us to better engage with these health professionals tomorrow. This new database will also make it easier for RHWA to maintain contact with graduates and our NRHSN Alumni.

The RWA Network also conducts ‘Go Rural’ marketing events around the country throughout the year, showcasing rural and remote practice to urban medical students and junior doctors. Other initiatives include jurisdictional-specific scholarships and programs to support rural medical students.

As noted, a University of Queensland research project commissioned by RHWA will shortly provide further insights on strategies to attract Australian-trained doctors to rural and remote practice.

5. **Any observations on the Member Body’s view of the Alliance’s policy priorities.**

Reviewing the NRHA’s ‘Twenty Steps to Equal Health by 2020’ policy document, it is evident that there are considerable areas of mutual policy interest. RHWA values our relationship with the NRHA and looks forward to continuing to work together to improve health services and health workforce for Australians in regional, rural and remote communities.