Invest in rural and remote health innovation and research to improve health

Rural and remote health was top of the agenda for more than 100 experts gathered for the 5th Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium this week.

The Hon Dr David Gillespie, Assistant Minister for Rural Health, opened proceedings by reminding those present of the crucial role rural and remote research plays in informing new and innovative approaches to health service delivery in some of the most distant and disadvantaged areas of Australia, and the significance of healthy rural communities to our national identity.

“So much of the heart and soul and sense of who we are as Australians, comes out of rural and remote areas” he said, noting the collective experience of practitioners, researchers, policy makers and governments represented at the Symposium. Such a diverse collective is vital in supporting government efforts to ensure policy and funding is directed to areas where it can provide the most impactful outcomes.

A strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher presence identified that Aboriginal-led and Aboriginal-owned research can assist in solving problems in Aboriginal health. More attention to integrating health with its social determinants was highlighted.

Delegates shared new, linked datasets to demonstrate the realities of health status and health care currently experienced by people living in rural and remote communities. The data shows increase numbers of General Practitioners working in rural and remote areas and therefore better health service access over the last 15 years. While celebrating this important progress, delegates noted the need to now intensify focus on the needs of small rural and remote communities who still have significantly poorer health and less access to health services.

Innovation and flexibility are key for future progress; researchers explored a variety of different models for supporting improved health and wellbeing. Given the diversity of communities and their various needs, delegates heard of the importance of researchers working in partnership with small rural and remote communities to develop their own solutions.

Delegates discussed how research on rural and remote health has moved away from just ‘counting illness’ and identifying problems to supporting new models and thinking about the complex nature of health with a recognition that health and wellbeing are impacted by issues of racism and broader social determinants of health. Trialling new initiatives and supporting their evaluation allows for new solutions with an evidence-base to develop.
To support improvements in health where it is most needed, in small rural and remote communities, there is a need to focus investment into partnerships between communities, health care providers and researchers to allow local innovation. Community led approaches have been shown to work and improve health and wellbeing – we just need a system to support innovation and impact.

The biennial Symposium was convened by the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), in partnership with the Federation of Rural Australian Medical Educators (FRAME), the Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHCRIS), and the Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN). Generous support was also provided from the University of Wollongong, Curtin University, University of Queensland and the Sydney University School of Rural Health.

Participants included representatives from key national data agencies, senior and emerging research leaders and policy makers across all levels of government, as well as health service providers and co-ordination networks.

The full program and links to all speaker presentations can be found on the Symposium website at [www.ruralhealth.org.au/symposium2016](http://www.ruralhealth.org.au/symposium2016)

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