Women’s Health Study reveals resilient rural women are still short-changed in health

A special report on rural-urban differences from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH), based at the Universities of Newcastle and Queensland, highlights the resilience of rural women during drought.

Rural women have poorer health in general and worse access to health services than those in cities - and the health care they get is inadequate. The risk and prevalence of diabetes and hypertension are much higher for women (of all ages) with increasing distance from major cities. Rural women were more likely to die from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer and ischaemic heart disease than women in urban areas.

The report shows that women in rural areas have higher levels of risk factors for heart disease. Obesity, which is strongly associated with increased risk of diabetes and hypertension, is much higher for country women of all ages.

The healthcare rural women receive is not measuring up. They have lower rates of life-saving procedures such as revascularisation. Rural women with heart conditions also had lower levels of recent cardiological review, echocardiograms and stress tests. The further from major cities women lived, the fewer visits they had to specialists.

Yet rural women are responding strongly to health promotion messages. Breast screening rates were highest in remote areas and Pap test rates highest in regional areas. Such screening and healthcare measures need to be put in place for conditions currently missing out, and could be expected to be well used by rural women.

Despite the differences in objective measures of health, there was little difference in the self-reported physical and mental health of rural and urban women. The report’s authors suggest that women in rural areas have developed greater resilience than their city sisters through dealing with adversity, perhaps reinforced by government support in times of drought.

Contacts
Lesley Barclay - Chair: 0412 282 801
Gordon Gregory - Executive Director: 02 6285 4660