



**HealthWorkforce**  
AUSTRALIA

# Retention of Nursing and Allied Health Professionals in Rural and Remote Australia summary report

March 2014



An Australian Government Initiative

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HWA funded Primary Health Planning Services (PHPS) to undertake research with the overall objective of identifying factors impacting on the retention of nursing and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia who have been recruited under HWA's Rural Health Professionals Program. The findings from this research are presented in this summary report developed by PHPS. This report includes the views and recommendations of PHPS, and does not necessarily reflect the views of HWA or the Australian Government, or indicate a commitment to a particular course of action.

# Contents

Background	4
Objectives	4
Methodology	5
Key Findings	5
1. Nursing and allied health professional background	5
2. Reasons for relocating to rural or remote Australia	6
3. Experience of working in rural or remote Australia	6
4. The Rural Health Professionals Program	7
Future considerations	8

# Background

Australia-wide there is a shortage of nursing and allied health professionals working in rural and remote locations. This shortage is likely to become more apparent in the future given the ageing population, growth in burden of chronic disease and subsequent increased emphasis upon multidisciplinary service delivery.

The Rural Health Professionals Program (RHPP) is a new workforce scheme designed to increase the nursing and allied health workforce in rural and remote Australia.

RHPP is an initiative of Health Workforce Australia (HWA) which is funding Rural Workforce Agencies (RWAs) to attract and recruit nursing and allied health professionals from Australian metropolitan and approved overseas locations.

Each RWA is responsible for identifying vacancies within their jurisdiction and providing a fully case managed recruitment service to eligible candidates including retention support for up to two years.

The national rollout of this program in 2012 provided an opportunity to undertake independent research amongst both locally and overseas-trained professionals currently working in rural and remote Australia.

Whilst substantial literature exists regarding issues affecting retention of medical practitioners, there is little research pertaining to nursing and allied health professionals, particularly in an Australian rural and remote setting.

# Objectives

The overall objective of this research project is to identify factors related to the retention of nursing and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia.

These retention factors were initially identified through a qualitative research phase and then quantified amongst a larger representative sample.

From this, recommendations can be made regarding strategies to enhance retention amongst nursing and allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia.

# Methodology

A 2-phase research program was undertaken involving:

Phase 1 – a qualitative phase of n=15 face to face indepth interviews amongst nursing and allied health professionals placed under the RHPP in three Australian states/ territories.

The purpose of this phase was to uncover in depth the range of issues potentially impacting on retention to inform development of the Phase 2 questionnaire. This phase was completed in January 2013 .

Phase 2 – a quantification of the issues identified through Phase 1, conducted online amongst n=155 nursing and allied health professionals.

All professionals placed under the RHPP in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory were emailed a survey (a total of 240 eligible respondents, giving a 65 per cent response rate to the Phase 2 survey).

## Key Findings

### 1. Nursing and allied health professional background

The respondents accessed as part of this research were predominantly female (70 per cent) and young (mean age 33 years, 51 per cent aged 30 years or younger). This is in contrast to the rural and remote General Practitioner workforce in Australia (38 per cent female, mean age 50 years)<sup>1</sup>.

As to be expected amongst a younger population, 1 in 3 did not have a spouse or partner and 2 in 3 had no dependent children.

Whilst approximately half the sample had previously lived in a rural or remote area (either in Australia or overseas), most (77 per cent) had not previously worked in an Australian rural or remote setting.

There were some differences between professional types in terms of basic demographics, educational background and area of work. For example, nurses tended to be older than other allied health professionals and did not work in private practice. Most dentists were male and all dentists worked in regional (as opposed to remote) areas.

These findings highlight that:

- On a range of demographic characteristics, nursing and allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia are a different population of healthcare professionals compared with medical practitioners working in these areas<sup>2</sup> (and as such are likely to have different needs/ support requirements for working in rural and remote areas).
- There are differences between professional groups amongst the nursing and allied health population (which again may require different support and retention strategies).

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1 Rural Health Workforce Australia (2013). Medical practice in rural and remote Australia: Combined Rural Workforce Agencies National Minimum Data Set report as at 30th November 2012. Melbourne: RHWA.

2 Rural Health Workforce Australia (2013). Op cit.

## 2. Reasons for relocating to rural or remote Australia

In terms of what attracted professionals to working in rural or remote Australia, the two most frequently nominated factors were developing professional skills and the desire for a change/ to try something new.

Work-life balance, better job opportunities and career advancement were all nominated by a relatively large proportion of respondents.

Attraction to the area/location and climate were also key factors that attracted professionals to rural and remote Australia.

It is also noteworthy in the context of the RHPP that nearly two in five respondents (38 per cent) nominated financial incentives as a factor attracting them to their position.

A review of the factors that attracted professionals to rural and remote Australia according to their gender, age and the Australian Standard Geographical Classification Remoteness Area (RA<sup>3</sup>) of where they are currently working highlighted some differences. For example, more professionals working in RA4 or 5 ('remote' areas) nominated wanting a change, type/variety of work and personal fulfillment as factors attracting them to the position, whereas those working in RA2 ('inner regional' areas) were more likely to nominate housing affordability and a lower cost of living.

Consistent with the Phase 1 qualitative research, these findings highlight:

- The importance of emphasising the "professional" aspects of rural and remote work, as well as the "community" and "lifestyle" issues in recruitment strategies.
- The importance of ensuring that these recruitment strategies also reflect potential differences between different types of professionals and the Remoteness Area of the position.

## 3. Experience of working in rural or remote Australia

Overall, the majority of respondents rated their experiences to date of working in rural and remote Australia in an RHPP-supported position positively:

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<b>Rating of professional/work-related experience:</b>		
73 per cent rate positively	20 per cent rate as average	7 per cent rate negatively
<b>Rating of community/ social experience:</b>		
74 per cent rate positively	21 per cent rate as average	5 per cent rate negatively
<b>Rating of overall experience:</b>		
79 per cent rate positively	20 per cent rate as average	1 per cent rate negatively

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3 Australian Standard Geographical Classification-RA is a geographic classification system that was developed in 2001 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as a statistical geography structure which allows quantitative comparisons between 'city' and 'country' Australia. The purpose of the structure is to classify data from census Collection Districts into broad geographical categories, called Remoteness Areas (RAs). The RA categories are defined in terms of 'remoteness' - the physical distance of a location from the nearest Urban Centre (access to goods and services) based on population size.

A number of statements designed to explore in detail respondents' professional and community experiences were analysed in conjunction with the above ratings and a range of demographic and background characteristics.

The purpose of this analysis was to identify which factors were most strongly associated with positive professional and community experience (and hence result in increased workforce retention, according to the framework proposed by Humphreys et al<sup>4</sup>).

This analysis yielded a number of findings which are detailed in this report. In summary however:

- A range of demographic independent variables including gender, age, where the professional is currently working and prior rural experience were not statistically significantly correlated with any of the 4 dependent or 'outcome' variables ('how long intend to remain in current position', 'rating of professional experience', 'rating of community experience', 'rating of overall experience').
- The dependent variable of 'how long intend to remain in current position' was significantly correlated with 'rating of professional experience' and 'rating of overall experience', but not with rating of 'community experience'.
- A number of the independent attitudinal variables were significantly correlated with the dependent variable of 'rating of professional experience'.
- The two variables with the highest correlation ( $r > 0.5$ ,  $n=144$ ,  $p < .001$  level [2 tailed]) were 'Management is supportive' and 'Management has realistic expectations of me'.
- Having good administrative support, good facilities & equipment to work with, a management that is interested in what they are doing, and feeling that they are developing new professional skills are also significantly correlated with respondents' rating of their overall professional experience ( $r > 0.4$ ,  $n=144$ ,  $p < .001$  level [2 tailed]).
- These findings suggest that aspects related to professional or workplace experience may be of greatest importance in developing strategies to enhance workforce retention amongst these professionals working in rural and remote Australia. In particular, it would appear that efforts to put in place good management policies and support will be of greatest benefit.
- These findings should not be interpreted to imply that the community or social aspects of a professional's experience in rural or remote Australia are of little importance in respect to workforce retention, merely that in a relative sense, workplace aspects are of potentially greater importance.
- A confounding variable may be that amongst this sample, just over half had previously lived in a rural or remote area and hence community aspects may be of greater importance amongst those with no previous rural experience. The sample size of this research project did not permit an analysis of the association between the dependent and independent variables according to prior rural experience.

#### 4. The Rural Health Professionals Program

With respect to the actual Rural Health Professionals Program under which these respondents were all currently being supported, the findings indicate a very high level of satisfaction with the program and the support received.

In fact, 98 per cent indicated that they were satisfied with the assistance and support they have received under the Program and 90 per cent claimed they would recommend the RHPP to a colleague.

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4 Humphreys, J. S., Wakerman, J., Wells, R., Kuipers, P., Jones, J., Entwistle, P. & Harvey, P. (2007). Improving primary healthcare workforce retention in small rural and remote communities – How important is ongoing education and training? Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute, Canberra, ACT.

# Future considerations

The future considerations made as a result of this research are based on the findings of the report. A suggested timeframe for their implementation is given for each.

## Future consideration 1

Recruitment and retention strategies for nurses and allied health professionals to rural and remote areas are reviewed in light of the demographic, education and workforce background of these professionals, in particular:

- That the majority have no experience working in rural and remote Australia (though they may have lived, or even grown up, in a country town).
- That employment opportunities for spouses/ partners continues to be a challenge and that in many cases, recruiters are in essence placing two professionals (and often two healthcare professionals) into a rural or remote community rather than one. For example, strategies may include an increased focus on employment re-training for partners, online learning opportunities, and ensuring candidates are fully appraised of potential employment challenges for their partner.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 2

Recruitment strategies for nurses and allied health professionals to rural and remote areas reflect a balance between highlighting both professional rewards/ benefits (eg developing professional skills, professional challenges) and lifestyle rewards (eg attractions of the local area, climate).

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 3

Recruitment strategies for nurses and allied health professionals to rural and remote areas are reviewed in light of potential variances in the age of the professional and the Remoteness Area of the position. For example, older professionals are more likely to be looking for a position that offers a good work-life balance, and the lower cost of living and housing in Remoteness Area 2 could be highlighted for positions in these regions.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 4

Recruitment and retention strategies for nurses and allied health professionals to rural and remote areas are reviewed in light of potential variances according to the state/ territory and the Remoteness Area of the position (eg the lower cost of living and housing in Victoria and the conversely higher cost in the NT and WA).

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 5

Further enquiries be undertaken to shed light on the source of dissatisfaction amongst those RHPP candidates with suppressed overall satisfaction ratings.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-term**

## Future consideration 6

Consideration be given by funding bodies to increasing the financial incentives available for professionals working in remote and very remote areas to reflect the higher cost of housing and living expenses in these regions.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 7

Future research focus on the work-related issues faced by allied health professionals (as opposed to nurses), particularly in areas such as access to CPD, administrative support and facilities and equipment.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: medium-longer term**

## Future consideration 8

In the development of retention strategies for nursing and allied health professionals working in rural and remote Australia, consideration be given to the finding that it is potentially the professional aspects of the role (and in particular, a supportive management with realistic expectations and associated administrative and workplace support) that will have a greater impact on retention than social/ community aspects.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: short-medium term**

## Future consideration 9

Further research be undertaken to validate these findings that professional aspects may be of greater impact in enhancing workforce retention, particularly amongst professional groups other than nurses.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: medium-longer term**

## Future consideration 10

Further research be undertaken to validate these findings that professional aspects may be of greater impact in enhancing workforce retention, with a study design that will enable a comparison between professionals with and without prior rural experience.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: medium-longer term**

## Future consideration 11

Future consideration be given to (and research be undertaken in relation to) the potential strategies that can be implemented to establish social networking links for nursing and allied health professionals working in remote and very remote Australia.

**Suggested implementation timeframe: medium term**



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