



Celebrating 20 years of the Australian Rural Health Education Network

Remarks by Christine Howard, Chair of the Australian Rural Health Education Network at the 8th Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium
6 October 2021

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands from which we are meeting today. I am on beautiful Wiradjuri country and would like to pay my respects to Elders past and present and acknowledge any First nations people with us today.

I am delighted to be here today representing the Australian Rural Health Education Network.

ARHEN is the national association and peak body for the 16 University Departments of Rural Health located around the country.

ARHEN's purpose through these departments of rural health is to deliver high quality health education, research and advocacy that improves the health and wellbeing of people in rural and remote communities.

This year is ARHEN's 20th anniversary and we are delighted to mark the occasion by being a sponsor of this Symposium.

ARHEN has always been a strong supporter of the National Rural Health Alliance and rural health research. We are committed to supporting high quality research that addresses the needs of rural and remote communities and seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of people in these regions.

Researchers from our University Departments of Rural Health have been regular contributors to the Australian Journal of Rural Health as well as presenting at the Alliance's conferences and webinars. It is pleasing to see a number of researchers from our University Departments of Rural Health presenting at this symposium.

I would like to take a moment today to briefly outline ARHEN's history.

Our story starts in 1996 when the Australian Government decided to fund the initial cohort of University Departments of Rural Health.

The Government's objective was to create rurally based academic centres to support the development of a multi-disciplinary workforce to better address the health care needs of people in rural and remote regions.

Between 1996 and 2001, nine University Departments of Rural Health were established across the country including at Broken Hill, Mt Isa, Whyalla, Launceston, Alice Springs, Geraldton, Shepparton, Warrnambool and Lismore.

From the outset, these Departments of Rural Health had a very clear role and mandate. This included:

- facilitating rural and remote training placements for nursing, midwifery and allied health students;
- establishing rural teaching facilities such as clinical labs, training rooms and libraries;
- providing accommodation and social support for students undertaking a rural or remote placement;
- facilitating cultural safety training for students on placement; and
- supporting the continuing professional development needs of rural and remote health professionals.

In addition, the University Departments of Rural Health were tasked with growing the evidence base through research focused on:

- the training, recruitment and retention of the rural health workforce;
- improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island health; and
- addressing population health issues in their regional areas.

In 2001, the directors of the original University Departments of Rural Health decided to form ARHEN to provide a national voice on rural and remote health education and research.

Many of these founding members have been early leaders in the field of Australian rural and remote health research and would be familiar to this audience.

ARHEN is fortunate to have on its Board a number of nationally and internationally recognised researchers who have not only helped to grow the body of literature on rural and remote health, but also mentored a number of early-career researchers.

Since 2001, successive Australian Governments have continued to invest in the University Departments of Rural Health and we have now grown to 16 centres around the country.

In addition to the locations I previously mentioned, we now have a presence in Tamworth, Bendigo, Broome, Toowoomba and Wagga Wagga as well as offices and facilities in number of smaller towns around the country.

There are now 19 universities involved in our network representing nearly half of all Australian Universities.

A recent national evaluation commissioned by the Commonwealth found that we are having a positive impact on:

- growing and supporting the rural health workforce;
- building the evidence base through research;
- developing innovative teaching partnerships with local communities; and
- creating economic and social value in the regions.

These results are a credit to the thousands of academics, researchers and support staff who have helped build the University Departments of Rural Health over the past two decades.

Additionally, with continuing Government investment in the program, we look forward to welcoming the 17th University Department of Rural Health to our network in 2022.

Going forward, ARHEN and the University Departments of Rural Health will continue to focus on delivering high quality education and research that improves the health and wellbeing of the communities we serve.

I would like to acknowledge my fellow and past Board directors for their commitment to rural health teaching and research. Their passion to the cause is outstanding and I am fortunate to be a part of this group.

I would also like to acknowledge our current National Director Joanne Hutchison as well as past National Directors who have helped to keep our ship on course.

To mark ARHEN's 20th anniversary, we are this week launching our new logo and website to showcase the commitment, diversity and success of University Departments of Rural Health.

I encourage you to visit our new site to learn more about the research priorities and papers from our network, as well as the supports available to rural and remote health students, professionals and researchers.

In closing, ARHEN is proud to be a sponsor of the Symposium and I would like to thank the National Rural Health Alliance for hosting this event in challenging circumstances.

I hope you all enjoy the remainder of the program and I wish you well with your individual research and endeavours.