

Department of Rural Health, University of Sydney PHC-RED Program Presentation September 2002

The Department of Rural Health is responsible for supporting the PHC-RED program in western NSW (Dubbo/Plains, Outback and Barrier Divisions of General Practice) and for providing leadership in rural initiatives for the NSW PHC RED Collaboration.

Our focus is on developing research skills among rural primary health care professionals and supporting them to undertake their own research, and undertaking collaborative research and development work in primary health care.

Our activity is structured around four areas – education, research network, program management and departmental research.

Highlights

Education:

- The Graduate Certificate in Population Health Research Methods was introduced in 2001; to date 20 novice researchers have enrolled. The course is offered by flexible delivery and runs over 18 months, covering various aspects of research such as epidemiology, biostatistics and social research methods. In 2003 the course will be offered on the North Coast, as well as in western NSW.
- Demand for research skills workshops is increasing. To date 65 PHC workers have attended two workshops, and three others are planned for this year. Workshops targeting evaluation skills are currently being developed.

Research network

- We are building a research network (RuralNet) to support primary health care workers interested in research. The network is primarily based around the graduate certificate and currently has 25 members. It offers regular journal clubs and a seminar program, and links novice and experienced researchers.

Program management

- We established the Rural Working Group for the NSW Collaboration, and provide the group's secretariat. The group provides a forum for coordinating education and research network activity, sharing resources across regions, and sharing of experiences working with rural practitioners.

Departmental research

- Two papers have been published from our lead research program which is undertaken for the Broken Hill Environmental Lead Centre. Two Graduate Certificate students presented research papers at national and international conferences during 2002, and 5 are presenting at the upcoming NSW Primary Health Care Research Conference. We are also partners in two collaborative research projects on vascular disease and mental health.

Issues

For primary health care workers to be actively involved in research, four challenges will need to be met:

- development of a culture of research in health service organisations
- provision of infrastructural support for research in rural areas
- maintenance of a critical mass of researchers in rural areas
- management of competing demands for aspiring researchers from clinical workload and requirements of other programs.

Opportunities

Strengthening the program by aligning the PHC-RED activities with other initiatives within our School of Rural Health at the University of Sydney, in post-graduate medical education, and with health service-based education and research priorities.

Contributing to ARHEN's effort in promoting collaborative research in rural health.

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