2008 School of Rural Health Research Conference: Chronic disease management in rural areas, Shepparton VIC, 15-16 October 2008

Conference report added 10 December 2008
Casey Barnes .............................................................................................................................................2

Conference report added 24 April 2009
Andrew Aldous ..........................................................................................................................................5

Reports submitted by RAMUS scholars and Alumni who attended this conference with support from the RAMUS Conference Placement Program
Casey Barnes

The 2008 School of Rural Health Research Conference

Theme: “Chronic Disease Management in Rural Areas”
Location: Shepparton Victoria
Attendee: Casey Barnes

This year I was lucky to be awarded with a grant to attend the 2008 School of Rural Health Research Conference, which was located in Shepparton, Victoria. The event included a pre-conference workshop and a one day conference.

Attending this conference was a great experience, I was able to understand more about the context of health care in the wider community and gave me insight into how the current system can be improved to benefit those in rural areas in the realm of chronic disease management.

Pre-Conference Workshop (Wednesday 15th October)

The pre-conference workshop was facilitated by Beth Wilson, who is the current Victorian Health Services Commissioner. Ms Wilson discussed privacy issues and complaints handling, and how this differed in a rural health setting. Ms Wilson comically covered the provisions of the Privacy Act in Victoria, which is similar to the Privacy Act in Queensland, currently applying to me. She explained that in rural areas discussing patients with omission of just their name was not sufficient for preventing disclosure of sensitive information, and that more care must be taken. She also discussed issues in regards to consent and negligence, and how these matters can be solved via a conciliation process, as mediated by her office. She emphasised the importance of meeting all the requirements of consent, and that a simple signature was not sufficient in many circumstances. This workshop refreshed my understanding of legalities of privacy and consent, as well as making me aware of the increased sensitivity of information in small communities.

Conference (Thursday 16th October)

Keynote Speaker

The conference was opened by keynote speaker Professor David Simmons, the founder of The School of Rural Health in Shepparton. Prof. Simmons explained the Crossroads Study which he had been involved with. The involved over 2,000 participants in the Goulburn Valley Area, and included data from home surveys, physical examination, and from government databases. The study aimed to highlight the differences in health services and health outcomes of those in smaller and larger regional towns. The large amount of data accumulated from this study is proposed to highlight areas which are of need, and where and how health services can be better utilised and developed.

Some of the interesting information Prof. Simmons discussed from the study included:

- the amount of take-away stores available to a population does not alter the BMI of those living within the town.
- smaller and larger town centres had comparable rates of self-reported mental health, asthma and diabetes.

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o men had a higher incidence of ischemic heart disease in smaller towns, as compared to larger centres.

**Paper Presentations**

Throughout the day, several papers addressing chronic disease management were presented. The sessions I attended included the following:

- Chronic low back pain prevalence and management: implications for rural and regional GPs
- The use of narrative in patient education and chronic disease self management
- A shire approach to developing an integrated chronic disease prevention and management system
- A comparison of acute health service utilisation by attendees and non-attendees of a chronic disease management service in Kyabrum
- A role for the community pharmacist in chronic disease management: a review of pharmacy practice research
- Health hearts in pharmacy: developing the framework for a pharmacy-based cardiovascular health program
- The incidence of vitamin D deficiency in pregnant women attending a rural Victorian antenatal clinic
- Barriers to and enablers of behaviour change in rural women with previous gestational diabetes

Each of these papers gave insight into different management strategies of chronic disease in a rural setting. It is evident from the findings of this research has indicated that chronic disease in rural areas requires a significantly different approach compared to that in metropolitan areas. It appears that infrastructure for such provision, currently is not available. In order to develop a strategy to provide the best health care to chronic disease patients more research like these, as well as government support, is required to better utilise funding and resources to maximise the benefit to such patients.

**Forum: Is it a Chronic Disease or a Human Being?**

This forum involved a panel of 7 professionals who work in the rural healthcare sector. The forum highlighted that the need for systems and infrastructure meant that the patient had somewhat been forgotten in the process and that we had lost sight of the patient centred approach. Some of the topics discussed included:

- The limited used of Information Technology in the health care sector. The forum indicated that this was an under-utilised feature of care provision.
- The current target market for the health care industry is to middle class metropolitan society. The forum indicated that in order for a health service to be effective it must be available to everyone, regardless of economic status, location, ethnicity etc. They indicated that the health care system was not “user friendly” for those who were not able to afford expensive health services.
- That there was not a patient centred approach, especially in a GP setting. The forum indicated the failings of the current GPs in communication, and in facilitating a holistic approach to health care
The forum highlighted the use of health care prevention. They discussed the possibility of health care being available to students in primary and high schools. This would allow equal access, improved screening and possibly compliance as well as increased health education.

The forum gave me insight into the current downfalls of the health care system as it stands. I hope that, in the future, I can have some impact on this situation to providing the best health care which is available to everyone.
Andrew Aldous

Conference Attended

Chronic Disease Management in Rural Areas

16 October 2008

Andrew Aldous

On the 16 October 2008 I was fortunate to be present at the Melbourne University, Rural Clinical School’s inaugural ‘Chronic Disease Management in Rural Areas’ conference. It was held in Shepparton and was a very well attended conference that provided a great variety of study topics, food for thought and constructive discussion. The conference had a marvellous mix of presentations by people going that extra step in their chosen field to produce research that will hopefully have a positive impact on the lives of those in the country.

For me, seeing the effort that so many people are putting in is very encouraging that there is an emphasis to provide the best possible care to the community and also it goes a way to showing that there is support in the country for those who desire to do research but also very importantly that there is support for the health professional.

The conference focused on two areas of medicine that are requiring creative thinking and new approaches to counteract their growing health cost. I found it incredibly thought provoking and stimulating. I also have greater appreciation of the need for medical staff that are technically adept and caring for the need of their patients, but also of the need for allied medical staff as paramount to providing a service that is acceptable and ultimately expected in a country like Australia.

What also grabs me as something that a rural career offers is the experience that can be gained by working in a rural setting. The clinical experience is well recognised now and one of the reasons why clinical schools that are based in the country are so highly sought after. But more important is the life experience that awaits the budding young medico who is wanting a challenge and willing to take the road less travelled.

The sense of community is one of the greatest assets for living in a smaller setting. The close ties between many members of the community sets up a teamwork like atmosphere and I felt that this was reflected in the conference in Shepparton. The fact that there is such research being conducted on top of already tiresome workloads is, I believe, a credit to the support and

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teamwork that is present in the country. As someone who loves the feeling of belonging to a team this is a key factor in my likely eventual move to the country so as to not be lost amongst the minions but part of a caring working unit.

At the time of the conference I was in my final semester of my degree and doing my rural general practice round. It was an excellent way to achieve a greater grasp of the many services available to you as a practitioner as well as to your patients. This way you could appreciate what each group or service was doing and aiming for rather than rote learning the services available. This was not only valuable then but now, as an intern, I am actually referring patients to these and similar services.

At the conference there were many health professionals that I had previously met at some stage during my rural clinical years. Some I had met a number of times such as an obstetrician who is a mentor of mine and someone who had supplied a reference for my intern applications, to the CEO/DON at a small hospital that had helped me attain a placement during a rural rotation, to many people that I had never met. All these people I met all increased the number of supports that I now have and can utilise now and in the future.

A huge thank you to the RAMUS team for all your help not only for this conference but throughout the six years of my medical degree. I simply couldn’t imagine the past six years without the support of the scholarship. The support and assistance by the team has also made any difficulties a breeze to deal with. The program is a huge success and makes a significant impact on all those who are fortunate enough to have a scholarship. I hope the initiative continues to make the difference to other scholar’s lives as it has to mine.