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

Conference Report: GPET Convention 2009
Sustaining passion: the Art, Science and Nature of General Practice

Chris Jarvis

I attended the General Practice Education and Training Convention held in Adelaide on 2-3 September, 2009. The theme of the conference was ‘Sustaining passion: the art, science and nature of general practice’. Broken down, this involved focusing on sustaining the profession of general practice and the obvious need to keep training registrars, fostering the creative side of general practice and maintaining a life balance, teaching evidence based medicine, and explaining the personality characteristics which set general practice apart from other specialties.

The event started with a motivating speech from Professor Tim Flannery, who very intriguingly compared the parallels between climate science and medical practice. He discussed the trend away from the close links medical practitioners had with science not that long ago, highlighting the disappearance of microscopes and scientific testing from clinical consulting rooms. He further focused on the effects global warming will have on humans from a health perspective, from less food being produced to maintain healthy diets, to increased rates of skin cancer due to UV damage.

One of the workshops I attended outlined appropriate methods to conduct Indigenous consultations. The facilitators of this session taught many tips and tricks that can be useful in this area, some of which are vital to avoid offending Indigenous patients. We also watched a DVD of doctor-patient interactions, which highlighted the good and the not so good when it comes to talking with patients of an Indigenous background. We learnt by observing the mistakes others were making, and will hopefully avoid repeating similar errors in the future.

The most relevant workshop of the conference for me was run by a GP Proceduralist (GPP) from the Bogong GP Training Centre. Unfortunately, GPPs are becoming few and far between as the viability of a GPP workforce becomes unrealistic due to centralisation of services resulting in limited procedural work, making skill retention difficult. This presentation emphasised how important it is to have GPPs in rural communities. Attracting, training and retaining GPP’s is fundamental to the health care of many people living in rural and remote communities.

The presenter has been a GP proceduralist his entire career and, as he is nearing retirement age, he is investing a large proportion of his time in training young upcoming doctors in his field, encouraging people to enter and stay working as a GPP and convincing government organisations of the importance of GPPs. He is part of a team which has just released a
publication called ‘GP Proceduralists: The hidden heart of rural and regional health in Australia’. This report stresses the importance of maintaining a functional GPP workforce in rural Australia and will hopefully encourage funding into the field. His presentation and talking with him during the conference encouraged me to pursue my rural medicine career.

Other topics ranged from experimental ideas such as the use of music in medical education, to a symposium on sustaining general practice into 2015 and beyond. The latter of these explored the health goals for Australia, the top four of which are:

- For every Australian to have equal life expectancy
- To target and decrease the incidence of obesity
- A special focus on treating, preventing and increasing awareness of mental health
- To increase the number of Prevocational General Practice Patient Partner Program (PGPPP) placements.

Obviously general practitioners are going to play a vital role in all four of these key areas, particularly in rural and remote areas where they are often the sole source of medical advice, assistance and patient education. With the ever growing Australian population, and the increasing focus on preventative medicine, we are going to need many more general practitioners in the future than ever before.

An added benefit of the convention was the interaction I was able to have with other students interested in similar medicine to me, as well as doctors currently working in my field of interest. Unfortunately there is no well known, clear cut pathway to become a GP proceduralist, as compared to a surgeon or a radiologist, for example. This is a benefit as it allows career path flexibility, and yet a hindrance as there is poor knowledge of their role and promotion of the diverse range of work available in this field. Attending this conference allowed me to hear the stories of people who have been where I want to go, and this instilled hope for me for the future. I have kept the details of some of these people and hopefully they are in similar positions when it comes time for me to link in to a postgraduate training position.

There was an amazing positive aura amongst conference delegates, and a buzz of excitement around the conference venue. It was very encouraging to see these GPs, many of whom had worked in rural areas for many years, with a positive, stimulating attitude towards their profession and in particular teaching the next generation of doctors. This convention left me with an invigorated drive to pursue my desired career in rural medicine, and provided me with contacts and potential pathways which can help me on my way. I am very grateful for being given the opportunity to attend.