

# Conference report: 9th National Rural Health Conference

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Standing up for rural health: Learning from the past, action for the future

7–10 March 2007, Albury, NSW

The program for the National Rural Health Conference was as varied as the range of disciplines and professions represented by the more than 1,100 delegates. The four days of proceedings were overseen with great humour by MC Julie McCrossin, who ensured that the keynote speakers and audience questions, performances, award presentations, book and documentary launches were accorded their due time and significance.

The conference theme of 'learning from the past and action for the future' was reflected in the diverse range of keynote presentations, which offered thoughtful and thought-provoking ideas, experiences, and evidence regarding policies and practices in the healthcare system, rural and remote workforce issues, and examples of effective and successful collaboration across discipline and geographic boundaries.

The conference is primarily concerned with the broader issues of physical and mental health and wellbeing in rural and remote areas, and as such did not have a specific focus on rural and remote families per se. However, the benefits for families are implicit in the aims of many of the programs outlined by delegates and were noted where feedback was obtained and evaluations conducted.

Among the keynote addresses were:

- a review of major themes from the past eight National Rural Health Conferences (over a period of 17 years) and their impact on government policy in terms of funds allocated to rural health issues (Steve Clark, Queensland Institute of Medical Research and past Chair of the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA));
- a reflection on social and demographic changes and transitions in regional Australia that impact on health and wellbeing by Rhonda Galbally AO (CEO, [www.ourcommunity.com.au](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au)). Ms Galbally also discussed the role of community groups in enhancing the resilience of community members, through their capacity to increase an individual's sense of control, of belonging, and of hope;
- a discussion of the nature and scope of the rural health challenge, recent achievements in this sector, and future challenges in developing a healthcare system geared to providing services with the capacity to adapt to the changing needs of patients and healthcare professionals (Philip Davies, Department of Health and Ageing); and
- a report on a multidisciplinary, cross-border model of cancer care including medical services, family support, respite care, and support groups. The presentation highlighted the critical importance of preparedness to work through obstacles to coordinated service provision in areas where arbitrary borders hinder effective service provision (Kerry Strauch, Upper Hume Community Health Service and Nikki Melville, Bogong Regional GP Training Network).

Paper presentations covered a wide range of physical and mental health-related topics, and specific domains such as parenting. Many sessions comprised outlines of programs developed, tested and sometimes evaluated in rural or remote communities. Groups targeted by programs include men and women, adults and children, youth, farmers and farming families, and many focused specifically on Aboriginal individuals, families and communities.

Development of the programs was typically grounded in community development principles and originated in the communities in which they eventually operated – local responses to local needs. While some of the conditions and constraints affecting service provision in rural and remote areas are unique, many of the issues faced by providers in launching programs and the strategies used to overcome obstacles are instructive for providers of family-related services in all parts of the country.

Several papers reported on research studies undertaken in rural and remote communities. A number examined issues related to governance and workforce recruitment and retention. Summaries of these will be listed on the Clearinghouse Resources page ([www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/resources.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/resources.html)). Many of the keynote papers and other presentations are available to download from the National Rural Health Alliance conference website (<http://9thnrhc.ruralhealth.org.au/program/docs/program.htm>).

Arts-in-Health was a key theme of the conference, with concurrent sessions throughout the program demonstrating how the arts can positively affect health and wellbeing. As part of the program, there were several theatrical and musical performances throughout the conference, including short plays, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, and a choir comprising conference delegates.

The NRHA conference is not only a forum for the presentation and discussion of research and practice. It is a forum through which members of the rural health sector can contribute to the revision and development of health practice and policy across rural Australia. Throughout the course of the conference, delegates are encouraged to help generate recommendations relating to rural and remote health policy and practice, that are then sent to individuals and organisations with the capacity to act on them. Agencies may adopt or incorporate those that relate to their own activities into their programs and/or infrastructure. The NRHA monitors uptake of recommendations from past conferences. The impact of these recommendations has been seen in a variety of outcomes, such as the establishment of effective programs in new regions, in scholarships for allied health and dentistry practitioners, in more strategic rural health research, greater attention to health issues and practice in the more remote regions of the country, and in contributions to discussion and action on workforce issues.

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## New industry representative body

### An update from the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

#### A new representative body for the Family Relationship Services Program

Over the past six months, the three former industry representative bodies for the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) have been collaborating to establish a single representative body for the FRSP. It is hoped the new body, Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA), will provide a collective voice for the family relationship sector and will lead the sector during this time of change and expansion.

On 8 March 2007, FRSA was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee with the following objects:

1. To provide an independent representative body to contribute and respond to the initiatives and policy of Government and others in regard to the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP or its successors) and associated issues to advance the wellbeing of individuals and families in the community;
2. To act as a conduit of information between the FRSP sector and Government on FRSP policy, program management and service delivery developments;
3. To represent to other organisations and Government the needs and interests of members in relation to key priorities and emerging issues;
4. To foster the development of policy, strategic planning and evaluation toward improved services and activities, to facilitate the delivery of high quality family relationships services focused on outcomes for individuals and families;
5. To facilitate FRSP sector development and the interests of members.

The Inaugural Board of FRSA has overseen the establishment of the new body in consultation with the broader FRSP funded sector. The governance and membership structure has received strong endorsement from the sector.

FRSA Membership invitations were circulated in late May and applications are currently being processed. Full members joining during June will be able to take part in the election of the new Board of Directors in July. The new Board will be formally announced at the Second Biennial FRSP Conference to be held on 1–2 August.

In anticipation of FRSA soon becoming operational, a recruitment process is now underway to appoint an Executive Director for FRSA. Work is also being done to physically establish the secretariat in Canberra.

If you would like a copy of FRSA's latest Consultation Paper or Membership Application Form, please contact [admin@frsa.org.au](mailto:admin@frsa.org.au).

For more information, please email [FRSPe-News@facsia.gov.au](mailto:FRSPe-News@facsia.gov.au).