

The 4th Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium

Making the most of rural and remote health research through collaboration

Given its focus on ensuring that rural and remote health research leads to changes in policy, it was appropriate that the 4th Rural and Remote Health Scientific Symposium was held at Old Parliament House in Canberra on 2–3 September 2014.

It was an occasion when “data custodians” (an interesting term, much used throughout the 2 days) came together with rural and remote health consumers, service managers and researchers. With the National Rural Health Alliance as one of its organisers, the event was unashamedly focused on rural and remote health research and what it might do for health outcomes in those areas.

Members of the rural and remote health research sector are proud of what we have achieved. When it comes to providing specialist health services, there is an accepted dependence on large regional centres and metropolitan areas. But where research is concerned, there is an emotional and intellectual belief that the best work for rural and remote areas can only be done in those areas.

In the final session, several suggestions were made for inclusion in what might be seen as a plan of action:

- regular meetings of the parties that attended the symposium would add value to the rural health research sector, particularly if they progressively include agencies responsible for data series relevant to the social determinants of health, such as those associated with the Department of Social Services. By including such interests, the health data and research sector can help demonstrate an approach to wellbeing based on the social determinants of health;
- rural and remote health researchers should talk with data custodians early, to help shape their



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doi: 10.5694/mja14.01280



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research proposals and to be clear about what data they really need;

- policymakers can be enlisted to help identify “best bets”, including evidence about health interventions that do not provide good value for money;
- the case for more focused investment through the National Health and Medical Research Council in rural and remote research should be pursued;
- the rural and remote health research sector should consider producing a publication on best-practice approaches to Indigenous health research and play a leading part in ongoing work to promote the elements of such an approach;
- a strong case must be made for the fourth phase of the Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) strategy (the first three phases of the PHCRED strategy have been described,¹ and a review of PHCRED is being completed in anticipation of Phase 4); and
- further consideration should be given to the establishment of a virtual academy of rural and remote health research.

The key element in this list is perhaps the last: an idea whose time has now come. A virtual academy would support health researchers working in rural and remote areas, and be a clearinghouse for research proposals and an advocate for resources. It would also support collaboration on ethics approvals, and help remove barriers to data access and sharing.

For information about the symposium, including the associated communiqué and links to the presentations, visit the symposium website at <http://www.ruralhealth.org.au/symposium2014>.

Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

Provenance: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

¹ Australian Government Department of Health. The Primary Health Care Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) strategy Phase three 2010–14 publication. <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/phcred-strategy-publication> (accessed Oct 2014). □



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