



# University Department of Rural Health

*Excellence and equity in Rural Health through education, research and engagement*

## Rural Health Academic Network

### Building capacity in small rural health services

- Who:** Rural Health Academic Network (RHAN) - University of Melbourne, UDRH
- How:** Jointly funded academics are embedded in rural health services to provide expertise in research capacity building, research governance, translation to practice and student support.
- Why:** A strong research culture generates new career pathways, improves staff satisfaction and retention, organisational performance and evidence based practice.
- Where:** Wangaratta, Numurkah, Cobram, Albury-Wodonga, Echuca
- Impacts:** Enhanced capacity of our rural populations to access timely and effective care. for the community; reduced burden on staff and service; improved patient care.

The **Rural Health Academic Network (RHAN)**, an initiative of the University of Melbourne, UDRH, has been collaborating with local health services since 2006. At present a team of jointly-funded academics is based in five rural Victorian health services: Northeast Health Wangaratta, Numurkah District Health Service, Cobram District Health Service, Albury Wodonga Health and Echuca District Health Service.

As a network, this team works to support education and build research capacity in these services, undertaking a range of evaluations, service development projects and supporting the rural health workforce in research and professional development. Team members are interested in allied health workforce, maternity care, chronic conditions, aged care and the prevalence of obesity in rural areas. The RHAN team supports their partner health services, students and practicing clinicians with research project design, ethics review, data analysis and dissemination of findings in diverse topics relevant to rural health. To date in 2018 we have supported 22 local research projects.

RHAN provides crucial research leadership and governance to our small rural health partners as noted by this comment:

*“The organisation is complimented on its accommodation and approach to research. The systems and processes in place are as comprehensive as any metropolitan health service. The partnership in research is comprehensive. The systems and processes in place were consistent, robust and sustainable.”*

(Auditors report of the ACHS EQUiPN organisation wide survey of Cobram District Health 2016)

Working with nursing, medicine, allied health and health administration disciplines in addition to local councils,

primary health networks and community groups, RHAN has seen a sustained impact most particularly in the area of workforce role development. Signature work has included Nurse Practitioner education programs in mental health, aged care, critical care, palliative care and emergency care; development of rural and isolated practice endorsed registered nurses (RIPERNS) to support after hours urgent care and research informing clinical practice using telehealth technology. Each of these initiatives enhances the capacity of our rural populations to access timely and effective care.





**Crucial to success is the translation of education and research into practice:**

## Case Studies

### Improving care for rural people with Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease (COPD)

#### The Problem

Sub-optimal coordination of care for chronic disease is associated with poorer patient outcomes and reduced quality of life. Rural health services can be challenged to provide optimal coordination of care due to workforce constraints and restricted access to specialist care.

#### The Response

The RHAN team is supporting Northeast Health Wangaratta, Albury Wodonga Health and Numurkah District Health in partnership with the Murray Primary Health Network to improve the service experience of people suffering from COPD. One project has identified barriers and enablers for coordination of COPD care within the Wangaratta and Benalla region from the perspective of health professionals and patients through surveys, interviews and analysis of hospital data.

#### Outcome

The outcome from this work is a new model of care informed by local evidence in Wangaratta and Benalla. The model includes a dedicated COPD transition officer position, a specific COPD cycle of care, a patient held 'My Lung Health booklet' and a number of workforce development initiatives including professional development and an ongoing community of practice to enhance the skills of health professionals within the region. There is further monitoring of hospital and GP data and a follow-up survey of patients and health professionals to continuously evaluate the impact of this project on patient experiences and unplanned hospital admissions.

This project has recently been nominated for a Victorian Public Health award.

### Improving access to afterhours urgent care through upskilling registered nurses and use of Telehealth in Rural Urgent Care Centres (UCCs)

#### The Problem

Victoria has 67 rural urgent care centres which see more than 140,000 presentations per year (9% of Victoria's total). Maintaining these UCCs is challenged by overall workforce shortages, GP burnout and potentially unnecessary low acuity presentations to the larger regional Emergency Departments(ED). This has had serious service implications across the Moira shire.

#### The Response

RHAN is working with Numurkah and Cobram District Health services to provide data for education of local communities on best use of the UCC and to assist local nurse's upskilling to provide urgent care. Across the Hume region more broadly RHAN provides ongoing evaluation support in the use of ED/UCC telehealth technologies. Work has included:

- A detailed analysis of the 2017 ED presentations to Goulburn Valley Health in Shepparton (triage category 3, 4, and 5) from patients who live in four nearby locations all with UCCs to better understand patterns of presentation and potential gaps in the UCC service provision.
- Academic support was provided to 3 local nurses to complete the rural isolated practice endorsed registered nurses (RIPERN) education.
- Data collection, analysis and evaluation reports on Telehealth services from Northeast Health Wangaratta and Albury Wodonga Health EDs to outlying UCCs.

#### Outcomes

RIPERN qualifications have enabled afterhours and weekend staffing of UCCs in Cobram and Numurkah.

Over 900 after-hours telehealth consultations to UCCs have now been provided & evaluated.

More than half of all patients presenting after hours to UCCs in the Telehealth service have avoided travel to a regional ED.

## For further information or to discuss a potential collaboration contact:

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Shepparton, Wangaratta and Ballarat

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