

Farmer centre gets more medical help for farmers

Hamilton's National Centre for Farmer Health is breaking new ground in getting better medical services for rural and remote areas.

It has Victoria's only regional placement in the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine's (AFPHEM) Specialist Training Program and is helping drive the future of rural health and wellbeing.

NCFH director Sue Brumby says "a key part of the Specialist Training Program is about long-term sustainability of medical services by creating major shifts in government planning and public policy."

Clinical associate professor Brumby says "rural areas too often come at the end of the planning line because although they cover big areas they have smaller populations."

AFPHEM president Dr Leena Gupta says "it is vital for healthcare to have a process which works with the broad brush of medicine – from prevention and a multi-disciplinary approach to health service studies and the health needs of a community."

"The increasing number of doctors involved in the program is helping produce better, and more relevant, studies to document some of the issues in services – or the lack of them," Dr Gupta says.

"And this is often the case in rural areas," she says.

"A key part of the Specialist Training Program is our graduates get involved in both public policy and ongoing research, with an overall aim of helping to improve the health of the whole community – and for the long term.

This is all about planning to meet changing needs, which are influenced by factors such as distance, population and demographics."

Dr Mark Newell, who brings an impressive domestic and international medical and research track record with him, currently occupies the only Commonwealth funded STP Public Health Physician training position in Victoria and one of only a few in regional Australia.

Based at NCFH in Hamilton, Dr Newell says his position is focused on targeted health promotion activities for farming families and communities.

He believes this is consistent with increasing emphasis in State/Territory and Federal health programs on the importance of improving the health of people in regional and rural Australia.

From HIV research in Asia, medical practice in the UK and stints at Bendigo in Victoria and Lismore in NSW, Dr Newell admits to a strong rural connection.

“My father was a country doctor in Colac and I have always had a hankering for living in the country,” Dr Newell says.

“The work I am going to be able to do in Hamilton, and with NCFH, will have a strong emphasis on farmer and rural health,” he says.

“Particularly assessing some of the issues which face people in rural and remote locations for which there are few resources to assist, such as mental health, injury prevention and chronic diseases.”

“I will be here until mid 2012 and am hoping in that time I will have benefited from the opportunity and at the same time be able to provide solutions, through policy guidance, on a bright future – not just for Hamilton and district but for all rural and farming areas.

“This scheme is all about trying to bring health professionals to the people, and with the research bases such as I have here we will be able to help accurately measure farmer conditions and needs.”

Dr Newell is the first Specialist Training Program doctor at Hamilton and with his strong rural background is more than aware of the problem in getting medical people to connect with the bush.

He says at the same time it is a demanding role for any program participant.

“The underlying philosophy behind the scheme is to provide financial support for accredited specialist medical training in non-traditional settings, outside the larger metropolitan university teaching hospitals,” Dr Newell adds.

For Dr Newell being the inaugural public health registrar at NCFH (based at Western District Health Service, Hamilton) – is a major opportunity but also comes at a personal cost.

Although the Commonwealth Department of Health provides the funding and ultimate approval of each application, each participant has to finance their own way through the course.

“I see it as a worthwhile investment in helping improve the profile of health delivery service to all Australians – I am just happy I am able to do it where I am,” he says.

**Further details are available from
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