



**NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.**

**A brief guide to nursing in
rural and remote settings**

> Introduction

For many people, including health professionals, working and living in rural or remote towns and communities provides an unbeatable work and life experience. Some people spend only a small part of their career enjoying it and for others it is a lifetime choice. Some people stay in one place and others move fairly regularly from one location to another.

Nurses wanting a rural or remote experience are provided with virtually unparalleled opportunities, variety and choice. They are an indispensable part of the health workforce in these areas. Their presence makes a very positive difference to health services and patient satisfaction.

If you are considering or preparing to practise as a nurse in rural or remote areas, this guide is for you. It is designed to help you adapt to the professional and social context of work in rural and remote settings in Australia and includes things to look for when choosing an employer. It has some reminders about the support that may be available from your rural or remote employer, and suggests questions you might ask. However it is but one source of information available to you and you should research widely. It is recommended that the guide be read in association with the *Guide for Employers*, which is included.

> The nature of rural and remote area nursing

Nursing in rural and remote areas is diverse, challenging and rewarding. You can be almost certain that wherever you go you will gain new skills that will also be useful and relevant later in your professional life and in other settings.

Wherever you work in rural and remote areas you will need expertise and confidence in cross-cultural issues and other local norms and customs you will encounter. Ask your potential employer and seek special advice.

Remote areas can present quite unique experiences and you may have less peer-group support than you are used to but there may be some special terms and conditions in your contract or employment conditions to help support your work in such areas. Find out as much as you can about the health setting and the community before you set out.

Experienced rural and remote area nurses find their lifestyles the most rewarding of all nursing work. We hope you will come to love it too.

> Before you apply

Make sure what you are getting into is what you want. Rural and remote environments and work arrangements are many and varied.

If you can, find some essential information about the climate, the geography, the community itself and the local economy. The public library, local tourism authority, the internet or possibly travel agent might provide useful insights. Talk to other nurses or specialised nursing organisations (see selected contacts).

You may already be involved in community organisations such as Rotary, Lions Club, Country Women's Association or volunteer organisations and committees. In your new community such involvement could help you settle in more quickly.

If using the internet:

- start with the website of the prospective employer itself
- the state/territory health service website will be of use even if you are interested in a position with another employer
- read position descriptions for nursing vacancies, and employment conditions/workplace agreements attached to the positions
- the tourism authority and local government and possibly the local division of general practice websites will also be useful
- using a keyword search in an internet search engine might also turn up some unexpected but valuable details about the community and location
- see if you can find out about the local community newspaper and try to get an edition or two or see if it has a website. You might also like to identify local university, TAFE and other educational facilities in the region.

If you have immediate family who will be going with you, and depending on personal circumstances, you should ensure that your family will have employment opportunity, access to child care and schools, and be able to participate in activities that they find satisfying. Lack of satisfaction of a partner or family is a significant factor in decisions by health professionals to leave rural/remote work areas.

> **Managing isolation**

Rural and remote area practice can at times be lonely both personally and professionally. You need to be able to accommodate the challenges. Your immediate family must also be comfortable with it. You should also realise that you may well be a long way from other family and that, in this case, visits will be time consuming, expensive and infrequent.

Relevant professional networks are an integral aspect of your work—not an indulgence. Join a professional association relevant to your needs (see the list at the foot of this document). The benefits include networking, professional development, mentoring and support, context-specific advice and information about relevant opportunities and issues.

Informal mutual support networks are important too, so make contact with health and other professionals in the area. Accept their offers to help you settle in. Accept invitations to visit other health care settings beyond your own. Be open to invitations to social and community events.

Sharing experiences, frustrations, doubts and fears among professional colleagues is important. If you have internet and email access in your location, set up an email network of friends and colleagues. If you don't, stay in touch by phone and become a letter writer.

> **Questions you might ask— especially if you're going remote**

If you are heading for a rural or remote location or making a change to a new location, possibly in another state, there are a number of questions you should ask.

Is the employment full-time, permanent fixed term? What leave and other terms and conditions are available to you and expected of you? What other employment contract terms and conditions are there? Are there benefits in addition to the minimum conditions provided under the new industrial relations laws, such as rostered days off, overtime, penalty rates, payment for public holidays or better hourly rates in lieu of some of these? Are there incentives offered such as educational opportunities, child care, or additional paid leave?

How many staff are there and in what disciplines? What is the structure of the health service? What visiting health specialists are there? What is the on-call system and how is it paid? How often do you get a weekend off? What are the

safety rules eg safe place in clinic, attending call-outs alone, out of hours and after dark, emergency preparedness and response?

What are professional registration and credentialing requirements?

Professional indemnity insurance requirements? Are you familiar with the mandatory reporting requirements in the state of your potential new employment, including notifiable diseases, child abuse etc. How and how often will your first aid and emergency life support skills be updated? What new skills will you need (**professional**, such as suturing and other procedural skills; and **vocational** such as 4WD driving skills, satellite phone use, etc?) Will you keep a journal?

What accommodation arrangements will be made where you will be based? Is it furnished and if so to what extent? Are cutlery, crockery and linen provided? What do you need to bring? What insurance arrangements will you need? What sort of television, radio telephone and internet access and reception is there? What security measures are in place? What about your pets: are they safe in the place you are anticipating going? Do you pay for rent, power, and gas?

What is the road to the nearest town like—sealed, gravel, dirt/sand, boggy? What about road flooding and closures, and how often is the road groomed? Do you need a diesel vehicle, a 4WD? What is the availability of fuel supplies and what are the costs? What parking arrangements are there for your car? What car registration and insurance matters do you need to address?

If you take up a community nursing role, or will otherwise have use of an employer-provided vehicle, clarify the tax and other implications of home garaging and personal use limits of the vehicle.

Where is the nearest source of fresh food? How do 'bush orders' from town work? Are there health or public library facilities? How often does the mail come, and go?

What opportunities are there for your immediate family for employment and/or child care and schooling?

What is the climate and what is suitable clothing for climate factors and cultural safety? Is there a book about the region, including a community profile, history, local culture and language?

If you are applying for a remote post, is there accommodation in town for staff, eg for off duty/leave and local professional development? Where is it and how

do you arrange it? How is it equipped (linen, TV, fencing, phone, secure area for your vehicle or pets?) Do you pay for rent, power, and gas?

> Check with your employer

Check with your employer about the following matters—some of which may be available for remote areas only:

- transfer of existing entitlements such as long service leave accruals
- reimbursement of relocation costs, including at the end of your contract if appropriate
- financial recognition of qualifications, years of nursing experience, years in rural or remote settings
- district and air-conditioning allowances or other adjustments for the degree of remoteness or isolation of the setting; annual airfares to nearest capital city for you and your family
- reimbursement of expenses incurred in the course of your work (travel, accommodation, meals and fuel etc)
- study allowances, including leave to access courses and financial support to attend
- the relief systems in place and arrangements for professional development
- mechanisms to support cultural awareness training and support
- occupational health and safety arrangements
- access to information and communications technology (ICT) (computer, telephony including mobile coverage, internet, broadband, video and web conferencing including telehealth)
- assistance (eg financial) with professional memberships.

> Workplace orientation programs

Ensure that your employer will provide an orientation program. This should include a cultural awareness program if Indigenous people are a part of the local community.

Cross-cultural safety is important for your credibility and respect within the community, and languages and norms vary greatly from community to community.

Ensure that the employer is keen to support an adequate skill level for you to practise in this new setting and is able to refer you to training programs that may be helpful.

Ensure that ongoing training will be supported, and that relief staff can be obtained for when you are away on courses.

Take advantage of what is offered, but know that you cannot learn it all at once—and are not expected to. Find out where you can get information when you need it. Learn the priorities, preferences, differences and challenges of your work context.

> **Fitting into the new work context**

No-one is expected to know the nuances and complexities of the rural and remote context from day one. It is likely to be quite different from anywhere you have worked before, including other rural or remote areas. See if the employer is able to offer a mentor program. This could be an external professional or peer or, if you are going to be working in an Indigenous community, someone in the community to act as a cultural broker.

> **The workplace**

There is much to learn, but also much for you to contribute in your new work context. Be prepared to say what you do not know or understand, or have not previously experienced. Be prepared to share your knowledge and experience from elsewhere with nurses and others in your new work setting. Keep a journal and reflect on your practice.

Get involved in the health service—don't be a passenger. There is so much you will be able to contribute, even if you feel a little nervous at first. People will help if they know you will let them and that you are ready to go the extra mile. It will be well worth the effort in terms of job satisfaction.

Keep your eyes open for professional development opportunities at the local hospital. They are usually offered periodically. This will provide an opportunity to meet your peers and other specialists. Also join one of the rural or remote professional nursing organisations. They provide a range of networks and supports.

> The community

In smaller rural and remote communities it is often easier than in the city to make friends through work and develop social networks because, generally, no one really lives that far away. Find out from those in your new workplace, from the local shire/council office or from community noticeboards (perhaps at the local store or post office) about sport and leisure activities, libraries and clubs, informal groups (perhaps photography, cooking or reading groups or walking, boating or fishing groups etc), or upcoming social, community or cultural events. Find out about the 'traps for new players' and the things and places to avoid (maybe for cultural or other safety factors).

> Making your way into the community

Keep your practice skills and cultural awareness up to date. Show yourself as keen and willing to get involved, even though you may have an anxious knot in your stomach at first.

Accept invitations from people wanting to show hospitality and welcome you to their community. Take a friend.

Rural and remote area communities are renowned for their friendly, welcoming attitudes toward new health professionals.

> In closing

If embarking on a nursing career or career stage in rural or remote Australia, there is much to learn and much to gain. One of several professional nursing associations might best support you, depending on where you choose to work. A list of contacts for selected organisations is provided below. The National Rural Health Alliance itself can also provide support or information via several means, and you might consider joining *friends* of the Alliance. Such supports can help overcome professional isolation that you might experience depending on your work setting. Your employer also has an important role to play here.

Remember that isolation is likely to impact on your ability to maintain important relationships with family and friends. This should be given due consideration prior to embarking on a career in rural and perhaps more particularly remote settings.

If you are clear about the sort of rewards and challenges you seek in your career, you will almost certainly find them somewhere in rural and remote Australia. Careful research on your behalf will help to ensure that your aspirations are met. Good luck—and welcome to the rural and remote health sector.

> Selected contacts

Organisation	Phone number	Web address
Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia	(08) 8953 5244	www.crana.org.au
Australian Rural Nurses and Midwives (formerly Association of Australian Rural Nurses)	(02) 6162 0340	www.arnm.asn.au
Australian Nursing Federation	Contact state branch office	www.anf.org.au
Royal College of Nursing Australia	1800 061 660	www.rcna.org.au
National Rural Health Alliance	(02) 6285 4660	www.ruralhealth.org.au
Australian Practice Nurses Association	(03) 9614 7777	www.apna.asn.au/site/index.cfm
Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses		www.indiginet.com.au/catsin



**NATIONAL RURAL
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**Supporting nurses:
a brief guide for
employers of nurses in
rural and remote settings**

> Introduction

This guide will be particularly useful for smaller employers or those recruiting to a solo nurse position. Larger employers will generally have human resource systems and local protocols already in place to cover many of the items addressed here.

Your new staff member will want to fit into their new community and maintain their professional skills and ability for effective practice in a rural or remote setting. Those not familiar with rural and remote lifestyles can find this a big challenge. Many employers assist by compiling information for new employees and providing a comprehensive orientation program.

Make sure you have good OHS policies and procedures documented and in place. Try to have an overlap between new and departing nurses. Conduct referee checks and confirm registration and credentials of new staff. Confirm with them the further credentials and training they will need in the role for which they are being recruited (eg first aid and advanced life support, 4WD and off-road driving skills, cross-cultural training etc). Help them identify and understand the role/s they will fill.

Feeling welcome in a community, especially in the early stages before professional and personal friendships form, can be critical to a nurse's perception of being worthwhile and professionally fulfilled in new work and social environments. These perceptions begin to form very early, and their impact can endure. Employers will benefit from taking the trouble to welcome and involve new employees. Time spent recruiting good staff and paying them well will save money in the long term through improved retention, safety and effectiveness.

> Attraction to a vacancy

In preparing to recruit to a vacancy ensure that you have up-to-date information about the region, town, and the position itself and available resources to support it. Consider the use of tourism resources to promote the town, community or region. Consider the wording in any advertisement you are preparing and how to ensure it will be published in the best place to 'capture' the sort of person you seek. An exit interview with the departing staff member might also provide useful information to improve the role.

Provide potential applicants with an application pack that includes sufficient information to enable them to make a sound decision. The information should be interesting and accurate. It should include a position description and organisational chart or profile of the service, as well as local information and benefits of the position and place.

> Recruitment and retention

Selection

Make your selection carefully. Short-term tenure and turnover are expensive and potentially compromise the quality of your service. Respond to your applicants promptly. Ensure that applicants know they will be required to provide: referees, current professional registration documentation that can be verified, results of a criminal record screen, relevant medical screening, a current driver's licence (if required), and documentary evidence of any credentialing required for the position (immunisation etc).

Offer of employment and appointment

Ensure your offer of employment is comprehensive and clear. It should clearly state such things as type of employment, duration of contract, terms of probation, salary, salary packaging, leave, other allowances, reimbursements and other entitlements. Particular expectations such as shift work, on-call and weekend work should be clear.

Induction

Organise for your new nurse to be met and welcomed on their arrival. Ensure that any allocated accommodation is ready for occupation. Include a 'starter pack' of essentials, including milk, cereal, bread and condiments, particularly if they will arrive at the end of the day or at night. Simple things like a tablecloth or bunch of fresh flowers can make a big difference. Depending on the timing and circumstances of arrival, one or more nights for them in a hotel or motel might be a good first option.

Orientation programs

Remember that experienced rural and remote area nurses once had to learn what they now take for granted! Putting out the 'welcome mat' for a new staff member is the first step toward ensuring their retention. The second is

providing them with information, support and encouragement to help them succeed and not to feel inadequate or inept.

If the workplace is in an Indigenous community, cultural orientation needs to be arranged as well as organising a mentor or guide who may help navigate any cultural taboos and norms that may present.

An ideal orientation will take at least a week and will introduce your new staff member to key people in the community and region, provide some geographic orientation, and enable them to begin familiarisation with the facilities of the organisation and the workplace itself. Stories abound of nurses who have been frustrated by the time taken to locate things that experienced people take for granted. Being able to access information efficiently contributes much to a new employee's competence.

Orientation—Week 1

Provide new staff with an information package, including the organisational structure, policies and protocols, the clinical policy manual, HR and OH&S information, annual report and a checklist of contact details for key people: name, job title/role, phone, email, mailing and physical address. Many wheels have been reinvented by new staff because there is no record of 'how we do things here'. If you are a smaller employer such as a general practice, the local division of general practice may be able to provide useful resources and support both for you as an employer and for your practice nurse.

Hold a welcome morning tea for those likely to work with the new person in the professional context. The sooner it happens, the better. If that first professional contact arises as a matter of necessity or as part of problem resolution, it may have untoward impact on the way those people work together on other clinical challenges in future.

Orientation—Week 2

Consider holding a 'welcome to the community' function arranged by a community organisation not tied to the work context. Many communities have derived the benefits of profiling the 'new nurse in the community' through the local press and other public means. Nurses who feel they have to earn the right to be in a particular community, rather than feeling overtly welcome and needed, are likely to take longer to reach their full productivity.

Orientation—Week 3

Find your new staff member an invitation to speak at a community function on something about which they feel passionate and comfortable. Rural and remote communities welcome such opportunities to learn of the way other communities and organisations do their work. The 'talk' may be about non-work interests, which helps the person establish an identity as someone with a broader skill, interest and personality base than that restricted to the work context.

Introducing the 'new nurse' to the community

Rural and remote areas are renowned for their friendly, welcoming attitude toward new health professionals. Some communities will be slower to welcome newcomers than others but, whatever the local circumstances, putting out the 'welcome mat' is the first step toward ensuring retention of a new employee.

Improving recruitment and early commitment to the role

Recruitment and retention remain the most challenging issues for rural and remote area health services. The hidden costs of workforce turnover and the costs of recruitment mean that employers in rural and remote areas should strategically invest in recruitment and retention.

Seek feedback from prospective and new employees. Involve neighbouring services in joint trials of some options that may suit your circumstances.

Employment incentives will improve retention. You could consider:

- reimbursement of relocation costs and (for remote settings) annual airfares to the nearest capital city for the nurse and their family
- salary sacrifice arrangements
- an accommodation allowance
- financial recognition of the nurse's qualifications, years of nursing experience, years of experience in rural or remote settings
- study allowances, including leave to access courses and financial support to attend
- salary loading to reflect the degree of remoteness or isolation of the setting.

Your new nurse will want to be assured about:

- the levels of human, financial and material resources in the workplace
- flexible employment models, rostering and reliable staff relief systems
- mechanisms to support cultural awareness in an environment that encourages learning and acceptance of difference
- child care, schooling and education, and opportunities for a spouse's employment or other involvement in the community
- risk management strategies, including support for relevant clinical skills, occupational health and safety, issues related to personal safety, cultural safety and personal coping skills.

Encourage or pay for your new nurses to join a relevant professional association. These are a source of specific professional development, context-relevant expertise and peer support.

Assist them financially to attend a meeting or conference of their professional association, usually ARNM or CRANA. They will return from such events with renewed enthusiasm, confidence and a raft of new ideas, some of which will suit your organisational needs and priorities. Your organisation will benefit from improved rates of retention.

Encourage peer networking as a source of advice, confidence, professional esteem, sharing of ideas and experiences. This will be particularly effective in reducing the sense of professional isolation they may feel over time.

> In closing

The cost of workforce turnover on your practice and on your business is considerable and includes the costs of recruitment and orientation as well as the reduced efficiency while new staff familiarise themselves with new systems and practices. Value-adding to the recruitment, induction and orientation phases of employment adds little cost and will help ensure that the nurse you recruit will meet your needs, feel confident in your workplace and community, and feel productive and valued.

> Selected contacts

Organisation	Phone number	Web address
National Rural Health Alliance	(02) 6285 4660	www.ruralhealth.org.au
Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia	(08) 8953 5244	www.crana.org.au
Australian Rural Nurses and Midwives (formerly Association of Australian Rural Nurses)	(02) 6162 0340	www.arnm.asn.au
Australian Nursing Federation	Contact state branch office	www.anf.org.au
Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses		www.indiginet.com.au/catsin
Local division of general practice	Check details	www.adgp.com.au
Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Check State details	www.acci.asn.au