

# **WONCA World Conference on Rural Health 5th Conference report**

**May 2002**

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## **RURAL HEALTH IN MARVELOUS MELBOURNE**

### **REPORT OF THE FIFTH WONCA WORLD CONFERENCE ON RURAL HEALTH**

#### **Introduction**

This Conference, held in Melbourne, Australia, 30 April – 3 May 2002, was by far the largest and most diverse in the series of World Rural Health Conferences. Over 900 participants from 40 different countries, including 500 participants from Australia gathered at Melbourne's Carlton Crest Convention Centre for this Conference whose major theme was "Working Together: Communities, Professionals, Services". The Conference was organised under the auspices of the Wonca Working Party on Rural Practice by an organising committee with representation from Monash University School of Rural Health, the Victorian Government Department of Human Services, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM).

Major financial support for the Conference was provided by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, the Victorian Government Department of Human Services and Monash University.

#### **Program**

The Conference had a strong emphasis on the whole rural health team with the full spectrum of presenters and participants including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, allied health professionals, other health workers, policy makers, managers and administrators, students and consumers. The Conference's major theme was explored through four sub themes: Recruitment and Retention of the Rural Health Workforce; Gender Issues; Rural/Urban Interface; and Indigenous Issues.

Each morning of the Conference began with a series of outstanding Keynote Speakers. Pat Anderson, Chair, National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO) presented the first Keynote Address on the topic "The Emotional and Social Wellbeing of the Australian Nation". This was followed by a challenging address from Professor Don Nutbean, Head of Public Health, UK Department of Health on "Tackling Inequalities in Health in Rural Communities – Experience from the UK". On the second day, Dr Florence Manguyu, former President of the Medical Women's International Association focused on "Addressing Gender Issues in the Provision of Health Services in Rural Communities". She was followed by Dr Michael Boland, President of Wonca, the World Organisation of Family Doctors who spoke about "The Role of the Rural Practitioner in the Health Team". Professor Roger Rosenblatt, Vice Chair Department of Family Medicine, University of Washington posed the question "The Environmental Imperative and the Rural Family Doctors : What can you do save the Earth?" and on the following day Dr Helen Caldicott, Founding President of Physicians for Social Responsibility addressed "The Medical Implications of Nuclear War with specific reference to Rural Communities". James Fitzpatrick, medical student and Young Australian of the Year 2001 presented the view of youth "A Rural Resurgence: Walking Together", whereas Dr MK Rajakumar, Past President Wonca and elder statesman of Wonca and guiding spirit for the World Rural Health Movement addressed the topic "Rural Health and Global Equity".

The Keynote Speaker session on each day was followed by a diverse range of parallel sessions including Symposia, Workshops, Free Paper sessions, Facilitated Poster

presentations, Poster Expo sessions and a variety of Clinical Skills Programs. In all, there were 20 Symposia presentations, 174 Papers and 30 Facilitated Poster presentations.

Each full day of the Conference concluded with Village Meetings. The Village Meetings provided the opportunity for interactive discussion and networking amongst Conference participants. These facilitated sessions also provided participants with the opportunity to discuss “Hot Issues” from the day and to contribute to the formation of recommendations for presentation to the final Plenary Session of the Conference.

The Social Program of the Conference also provided opportunities for networking and further development of the strong sense of fellowship amongst Conference participants. At the Welcome Reception following the Official Opening of the Conference, participants renewed old friendships and began meeting new people with a common interest in rural health. The Official Conference Dinner was a formal affair attended by the Governor of the State of Victoria with entertainment from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers and the Victorian College of the Arts School of Music. The final social session took the form of a traditional Aussie barbecue and bush dance with good tucker and entertainment from the Boola Boola Bush Band.

### **Highlights**

The 5<sup>th</sup> Wonca World Rural Health Conference was officially opened on Tuesday 30 April by the Premier of Victoria, the Honourable Steve Bracks. The Federal Government representative at the Opening Ceremony was the Honourable Peter Maguaran.

A Keynote Address entitled: “What is happening in Rural and Regional Victoria: the way forward?” by The Honourable John Thwaites MP, Victorian Minister for Health began proceedings on Thursday 2 May. Senator The Honourable Kay Patterson MP, Australian Minister for Health & Ageing was one of the Keynote Speakers on the last day of the Conference and her presentation was entitled: “Rural Health Inequalities and Challenges.

An outstanding feature of this Conference was the exceptionally high standard of presentations and involvement of Conference participants in all aspects of the Conference. Compelling Keynote Addresses were complemented by a variety of interactive parallel sessions and practical skills development for participating clinical practitioners.

At the Official Conference Dinner there was a special presentation celebrating 30 Years of Wonca which began at a World Conference of Family Doctors held in Melbourne in 1972. There was also recognition of Ten Years of the Wonca Working Party on Rural Practice which began at the Wonca World Conference at Vancouver in 1992.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation was present throughout the Conference and broadcast radio programs such as Bush Telegraph and Pacific Beat live from the Conference, as well as presenting the Virtual Conference through ABC Online. This Virtual Conference continues to be available through: [abc.net.au/rural](http://abc.net.au/rural).

As for previous World Rural Health Conferences, there was a sense that this was more than just an international Conference. There was a warmth and friendliness, a real camaraderie amongst Conference participants from all different parts of the world. The Village Meetings held to encourage active involvement of Conference participants, to facilitate the sharing of experiences, and to strengthen the sense of common interest and purpose.

For international visitors, another successful aspect of this Conference was the availability of linked Pre and Post Conference activities in a range of different rural and remote locations around Australia. These included the Riverland of South Australia, Shepparton in the north-east of Victoria, Tasmania, Alice Springs in Central Australia and Townsville in north Queensland. In addition, 85 invited participants from around the world attended the WHO-Wonca Co-sponsored Consultation: "Health for All Rural People" held at the Monash University School of Rural Health, Traralgon 27-29 April 2002.

### **Conclusion**

There was a real sense of excitement and energy about this Conference. Right to the end Conference sessions were very well attended including the final Plenary Session which discussed and endorsed recommendations from the Conference. These include: updates and improvements to the Wonca Policy on Rural Practice and Rural Health; the proposed Wonca Policy on Female Physicians in Rural Practice; and the Melbourne Manifesto: A Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health Care Professionals.

The Sixth Wonca World Rural Health Conference will be held at Santiago De Compostella, Spain, 24-27 September 2003, with a follow up meeting in Braga, Portugal.

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