

NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH ALLIANCE INC

PUBLIC SEMINAR

'KEY ISSUES IN RURAL AND REMOTE HEALTH'

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2006

WELCOME:

John Wakerman, Chairperson NRHA

JOHN WAKERMAN: Thank you very much for that welcome, Matilda, My name is John Wakerman. It's my great privilege to be the current chair of the National Rural Health Alliance. I'm from Alice Springs. I think the Alliance is a unique organisation. There are 25 national organisations on the Alliance now. This year we welcome the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association onto the Alliance.

Once a year we get together face to face. We meet often by teleconference, but once a year we get together face to face to talk about how to meet our common goal which is improving the health of people in the bush. We've had a couple of very busy days meeting, talking about the issues that are important for us, and yesterday we had a day in Parliament House where we met with about 45 parliamentarians including the Minister for Health to talk to them about the important issues for us in the bush and what our organisations and what people that use health services in the bush are telling us are priorities.

What we talked to the politicians about were very broad concerns about the viability of small rural and remote communities in the face of the current economic conditions, the structural readjustment that's been going on for some time, and in the face of the current drought and ongoing climatic change there's a concern out bush about viability of those communities and major population shifts from those small rural communities. There's been a lot in the press just over the last couple of days coincidentally about drought and mental health, and we talked to the politicians about mental health issues in the bush too, and that's important to us.

We also spoke in broad terms about having a renewed national rural health policy. Healthy Horizons, the current document, expires next year. That's the end of the term for that particular document. And we recognise and acknowledge there have been a lot of very positive programs and innovations over the last decade or so in terms of rural health, but the job is not done yet, and what we are looking for is a strong and robust policy that brings together both federal, state and territory governments and the Alliance to have an overarching document so that we can systematically develop services for the bush.

More specifically, we talked to the politicians about the poor state of oral and dental health in rural and remote areas, we talked to them about access to services, specifically about patient transport and accommodation, and we talking to them about workforce issues, about the need for a national rural undergraduate placement program and also the need for more undergraduate scholarships. There have been some very successful programs now for medical students, allied health, for nurses, for indigenous people wanting to study in the health sciences, and we want to build on that success and see more of those scholarships to build the future workforce.

We also spoke about the need for better evidence, building rural health research capacity, helping the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to do more of the very good work they do in terms of looking at rural health indicators and access to services.

These are also some of the key issues that are going to be spoken about today. These public seminars that we run – last year we ran one on remote health, a topic close to my heart. And this year as we begin to go into the pre-election period next year, we've identified some of those key issues in rural and remote health as the subject of this seminar, which is an opportunity for us to hear from experts – and by experts I don't mean just academics or health professionals; I mean users of health services as well – and to bring together this sort of audience: the public, academics, health professionals, public servants and others so that we can have a discussion around these issues and keep them on the agenda.

So on behalf of the Alliance I would like to welcome you today. We've got quite a full agenda this morning, but I warned the speakers I'm a strict timekeeper and I do want to have time for discussion so that we do have time for discussion. So, welcome.

On our original agenda, Senator Judith Adams was going to come and talk to us about patient travel and accommodation. Senator Adams hosted our visit to Parliament House yesterday. She was great. She is someone who before she went over to the other side was the honorary secretary of the Alliance. She has a nursing and farming background, she's from Western Australia and she's been a passionate champion of rural health and she's been particularly championing the cause of patient travel and accommodation, attempting to set up a national inquiry to look at those sorts of issues, and I know she was very apologetic about not

being able to come today. She is on the committee looking at stem cell research. They're meeting this morning and she just was not able to make it, so I give her apologies, but you should be reassured that she is fighting the good fight where she is at the moment.

So we're going to start off with a number of case studies looking at patient travel and accommodation, so these are critical issues in relation to accessing specialist health services. We'll have several of these presentations and a chance for a discussion at the end of that.

So first of all it gives me pleasure to introduce Jodie Altschwager, who is a rural liaison nurse at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. She's been in that position since it was created 10 years ago. She was the Rural Nurse of the Year in 2005 and in her position Jodie assists patients, families and rural healthcare providers as they move between the bush and the city. Jodie, thank you.
