

# Rural practice as a desired career option for health professionals

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## ABSTRACT

Rural communities are faced with many social, economic and cultural challenges all of which impact on the viability of the community. Globalisation has indirectly resulted in the decline of the rural sector, a net loss in circulating money in many rural communities and changed community demographics. Young people move from rural communities out of necessity to more populous centres which offer greater opportunities for education, employment and career development.

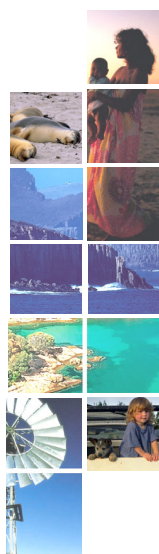
For many rural communities rationalisation of services including health has impacted significantly on the community, and the range and availability of services has declined. Current recruitment and retention strategies being implemented by rural health employers have not addressed the shortage of rural health professionals. Rural health employers and communities must be prepared to work with all levels of government, the health professions, education providers and industry if solutions are to be identified.

This paper will outline a range of strategies being developed and implemented by The School of Clinical Sciences in partnership with rural communities, local government and health employers to foster in students a desire to practice in rural areas. The School of Clinical Sciences offer programs in nursing, medical imaging, nutrition and dietetics, sonography, midwifery, Indigenous mental health, mental health, and nuclear medicine.

## INTRODUCTION

Rural communities are faced with many social, economic and cultural challenges all of which impact on the viability of the community. Globalisation has indirectly resulted in the decline of the rural sector, a net loss in circulating money in many rural communities and changed community demographics.<sup>1</sup> Young people move from rural communities out of necessity to more populous centres which offer greater opportunities for education, employment and career development <sup>1</sup>

For many rural communities rationalisation of services including health has impacted significantly on the community, and the range and availability of services has declined.<sup>2</sup> Current recruitment and retention strategies being implemented by rural health employers have not addressed the shortage of rural health professionals. Rural health employers and communities must be prepared to work with all levels of



government, the health professions, education providers and industry if solutions are to be identified.

Charles Sturt University is a multi-campus regional University situated on four principle sites in South Western NSW. The University is located on Wiradjuri land. The commitment of Charles Sturt University to regional engagement and the professions underpins the strategic direction of the organisation. Charles Sturt University prides itself on having been awarded University of the Year 1997. Charles Sturt University has embraced an open university policy and celebrates its ability to provide multiple pathways for entry to tertiary education. <sup>3</sup>

The Faculty of Health Studies is one of five faculties in the University. The Faculty of Health Studies offers a suite of health programs from undergraduate to professional doctorate and PhD. The commitment of the Faculty of Health Studies to the professions nationally and particularly to rural Australia is evidenced by the strategies employed to attract and retain rural students, processes of regional engagement; the research agenda; and innovative educational approaches supported by contemporary information technologies.

This paper will outline a range of strategies being developed and implemented by The School of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Health Studies, Charles Sturt University in partnership with rural communities, local government, corporate enterprise, industry and the professions to foster in students a desire to practice in rural areas.

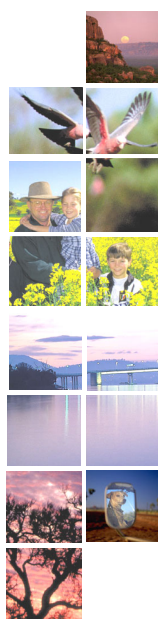
## THE SCHOOL OF CLINICAL SCIENCES

The School of Clinical Sciences is located on the Riverina Campus in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. Understanding the nature of the environment and the context from which students are recruited, and in which they live and work, is fundamental to the success of the School of Clinical Sciences.

The School of Clinical Sciences is a multi-disciplinary school providing programs at undergraduate to doctoral level in the following health disciplines:

- nursing
- medical imaging
- nutrition and dietetics
- nuclear medicine.
- Indigenous mental health
- ultrasonography
- midwifery
- mental health.

Programs are available in a variety of modalities including on-campus; flexible and distance education. All students have access to on-line subjects irrespective of the teaching modality the program they are enrolled in is offered. The diversity of health disciplines represented in the School are reflective of contemporary health care environments. The School of Clinical Sciences embraces the multi-disciplinary nature





health practitioners as being multi-skilled, innovative and self-directing.<sup>1,2,5</sup> Graduates of the School of Clinical Sciences are encouraged to reflect on the theoretical and experiential knowledge and skills gained in the classroom and in rural practice. Understanding the depth and breath of learning achieved and the advantages gained through rural practice raises students awareness of the benefits of choosing a career in rural practice.

## SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

### Student recruitment

The School of Clinical Sciences seeks to attract rural students to undertake undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Staff participate in national, regional and local rural health careers expos and visit regional high schools to promote studying at Charles Sturt University. The School of Clinical Sciences offers summer programs for high school students such as the Siemens Science and Science Beyond High School Schools, Physics for High School Teachers Summer Workshop and provides local TAFE colleges access to laboratories. The School of Clinical Sciences believes responding to, supporting local initiatives, identifying needs and potential opportunities are core business.

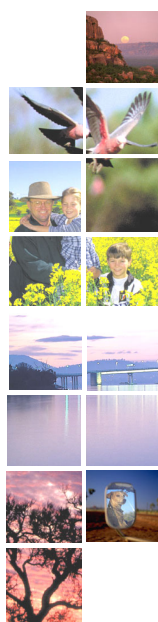
### Staff recruitment

Academic staff are recruited nationally however it is desirable that staff have rural health experience. Staff are expected to have an understanding of rural life and practice in a rural context. Many School of Clinical Sciences staff are members of national rural health professional organisations including AARN and SARRAH. The professional associations lobby the professions, community and the stakeholders including government and non-government organisations at all levels on behalf of rural health practitioners and rural communities and have successfully negotiated for scholarship funding to support undergraduate and post graduate education.

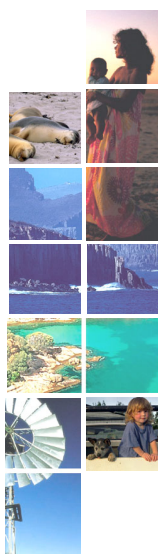
### Clinical education

The School of Clinical Sciences offers 5 undergraduate professional pre-service education programs (nursing, medical imaging, nuclear medicine, nutrition and dietetics and Indigenous mental health). Each of the programs is reliant on the support of the health industry for clinical education. The School of Clinical Sciences is appreciative of the support provided by clinicians and industry. The support of staff who supervise students while on clinical placement, promote the school to potential students, participate in the on-campus education of students and donate their time and equipment are highly valued.

The School of Clinical Sciences recognises the burden imposed by fiscal constraints and increasing patient acuity on the workloads of health service staff. The impact on undergraduate education is equally burdensome. To ensure that students are well prepared for practice as licensed health professionals the following strategies have been developed in consultation with industry:



- clinical web page (development phase)
- provision of on-line clinical information
- student forums
- health scholarships
- provision of scholarship support letters
- involvement with external strategic groups eg. Area Health Services, TAFE, Registration bodies, Rural Health Training Unit
- increasing the nursing clinical experience from 22 weeks to 24 weeks
- student conferences eg Australian Institute of Radiography
- CSU Workshop for Clinical Co-ordinators
- promoting rural clinical placements to encourage students to work in a positive rural environment
- increasing the number of rural placement sites
- providing students with clinical placement choices, SIPP placement (Student Initiated Practicum Placements)
- developing a standardised Clinical Information System within the School of Clinical Sciences
- appointment of a designated Clinical Administration Officer
- streamlining clinical placements, reducing the workload of industry participants
- developing collegial relationships between CSU (Wagga Wagga Campus) and with other universities and health services ie Southern Area Health Service, Canberra, Wollongong, Sydney, Newcastle
- promoting CSU Graduate Certificate in Clinical Education (credit point system)
- standardising the Nursing Evaluation tool for universities utilising SAHS clinical sites
- providing discipline specific Preceptor/Supervisor Workshops
- providing multi-disciplinary Preceptor/Supervisor Workshops
- engaging rural clinicians in developing strategies to promote the positive aspects of employment in a rural environment
- providing clinical support by attending to clinical visits and telephone and email contact with clinical sites
- proposing for nursing clinical sites to receive \$40 per student per week



- proposing for the above to be extended to other discipline areas to facilitate professional development opportunities for committed practitioners
- revising the “Preceptor Packages” on an annual basis
- engaging in quality improvement activities – student feedback questionnaires, workplace supervisor questionnaires, workshop supervisor questionnaires.

The development of a significant number of the listed strategies has been in direct response to crisis management. Other strategies however, have been designed and implemented as part of the annual and strategic planning process.

## Indigenous education

The School of Clinical Sciences is a leader in Indigenous Mental Health education. The Bachelor of Health Science (Mental Health) course is a restricted entry program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeking a career in mental health. This program is provided in partnership with Area Health Service’s who provide Indigenous mental health traineeships, thus providing employment and career opportunities for Indigenous rural and remote people and their communities. The development and implementation of this culturally appropriate course has fostered in students the desire to remain and practice in their communities.

## Service to community

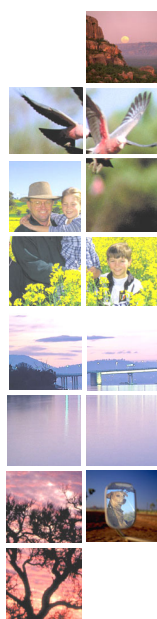
The School of Clinical Sciences provides an important service to the University and broader regional community. The School of Clinical Sciences Nutrition Clinic, provides a nutrition and dietetic service to supplement the service provided by the Greater Murray Area Health Service. The clinic is staffed by the School of Clinical Sciences nutritionists and students enrolled in the Bachelor of Health Science (Nutrition and Dietetics).

## Research

The research quantum of each University is intrinsically linked to the level of funding provided by DEST and the status afforded to University. Funding is determined on research outcomes and is inclusive of completion rates for research higher degree students.<sup>3</sup>

The number of higher degree research students at master and doctoral levels enrolled in the School of Clinical Sciences is growing. Research studies being undertaken by students and staff in the School of Clinical Sciences are largely focused on practice with master students research projects resulting in changes to practice and policy at the local level.

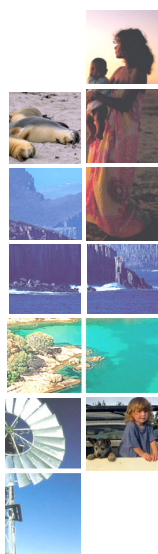
The acquisition in 2001 of a “state of the art” sonography machine donated by Toshiba and in August 2002 Phillip’s Marconi donated a new Gamma Camera, have provided the School of Clinical Sciences with infrastructure to initiate and participate in research with industry and to increase the numbers of students wishing to research in key areas including nuclear medicine, ultrasonography, midwifery, and physics. In addition, nursing staff within the School of Clinical Sciences are working with senior nursing



staff from the Greater Murray Area Health Service on a research agenda. A number of research projects investigating rural health issues undertaken by staff in the School of Clinical Sciences has been reported on at previous National Rural Health Alliance Conferences and include testicular cancer, prostate cancer, rural nursing and women's health.

## CONCLUSION

The School of Clinical Sciences is committed to rural health and is developing multiple strategies to improve access of rural people to tertiary education. In addition the School of Clinical Sciences is assisting to improve rural health status through the education of rural health professionals. The School of Clinical Sciences wishes to acknowledge the support provided and recognise that the continued success of the School is dependent on building and maintaining supportive and collegiate relationships with all stakeholders.



## REFERENCES

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## PRESENTER

**Karen Francis** is the Head, School of Clinical Sciences, Charles Sturt University Riverina Campus, and the President of the Association for Australian Rural Nurses. Ass Prof Francis is representing the Australian Council of Nursing Deans on the project. She is committed to advancing rural and remote nursing and believes the project has resulted in the articulation of the issues and developed recommendations that are realistic and must be advanced if the issues confronting nursing and rural/remote communities are to be addressed.

