

Connectivity, television and rural health: distance learning for health professionals throughout Australia

Don Perlgut, Rural Health Education Foundation

The Rural Health Education Foundation is a pre-eminent provider of distance education to general practitioners and other health professionals living and working in rural, regional and remote Australia. It is the only organisation that regularly produces and broadcasts a range of distance health-education programs across Australia. It's clear who the Foundation's targets are. But why does the Foundation undertake this task? How does it communicate with health professionals and how frequently? And how extensive is the Foundation's reach?

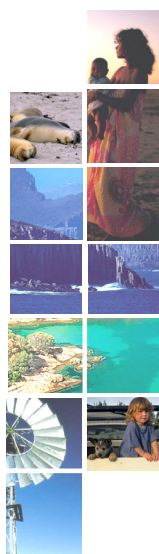
Professional isolation is a key reason. With the heavy workloads and on-call responsibilities of rural, regional and remote health professionals, travelling long distances to access continuing education is often impractical or impossible. Access to appropriate education that can be undertaken at a time of the professional's choosing and close to the workplace or home becomes increasingly important.

Poor access to new technologies and the inherent caution of regional organisations also limit opportunities for professionals to maintain and improve their skills. Without adequate connectivity and educational content, the efforts of Commonwealth, state and territory governments to recruit and retain health professionals are often jeopardised.

The Foundation uses satellite technology and a free-to-air television network of about 550 hospital-based sites called the Rural Health Satellite Network to disseminate high-quality advice and information. To the doctors, pharmacists, nurses and other health workers involved, the programs are invaluable. For many, it means that they can gain access to continuing education, without the need for them to find locum support or leave their communities.

The way the network is utilised is simple. On a regular basis (usually every fortnight on a Tuesday evening) the Foundation broadcasts an educational program involving an expert panel working out of a major television studio, and presenting information and case studies that are beamed live via satellite across Australia. The most attractive aspect of satellite as a means of education is that it is an interactive medium. Remote sites can phone or fax into the studio to seek advice from expert panellists or to promote answers or theories in response to the case study information presented. As well as live, interactive programs, the Foundation is broadcasting lecture-style programs that take a more formal approach to learning.

The Foundation archives all programs on its website. This makes it possible to access programs at any time of the day and anywhere through webcasting, just by logging on to www.rhef.com.au. Video copies of all programs are also available.



PRESENTER

Don Perlgut has recently been appointed the Chief Executive Officer of the Rural Health Education Foundation (www.rhef.com.au). Don is an expert on educational television, distance education and open learning. He managed the ABC's Open Learning and Adult Education programming for many years, including assisting in establishing Open Learning Australia and organising many collaborative ventures with Australian universities. He has also worked in interactive television (ICE Interactive Ltd), as Client Relationship Manager for the Australian Institute of Management and as a university fundraiser. He is a member of the Executive of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia.

Don holds a BA (Cornell University) and a Master of City and Regional Planning (University of California, Berkeley), and has studied film production at North Sydney TAFE. He has held lecturing positions at the University of New England and the South Australian Institute of Technology, and also managed a national rural local government finance project for the Rural Development Centre at UNE. He has published widely on television as an educational medium, social planning and crime prevention.

