

Key recommendations from previous Conferences

Ralph McLean

RALPH McLEAN: Hello, my name is Ralph McLean. It's a great privilege to be in Arrernte lands and it's a great privilege to speak to the National Rural Health Conference. What you're about to see is good, bad and scary. These are images from previous conferences. I'm here to talk to you, not about being a rural health consumer or bureaucrat or consultant, but about some of the things we have learnt in the last seven conferences.

I've been told I've made conference speeches that have made people laugh and angry. I don't want to make you angry today, but I do want to challenge you a little bit. We do want to make a constructive contribution to developing this conference at this stage. We need to recognise the value of history and the fact that some people didn't get old or grey, or fat, or thin.

Now, to think about the 6.93 million – that's my estimate – words spoken in the last seven conferences. Yes, it's about 750 words a minute, if you multiply that number of minutes, the number of hours in each conference day and the number of conference days and the number of conferences, 6.93 million words of Rural Health Conference. We should recognise that conferences aren't just their words. They're not just the Alliance. The recommendations and the conferences are not the rural health discipline, not rural health in government, or the rural health professions or the rural health consumers, or rural regional and remote communities, not the rural health movement. But we do need to recognise the conferences as being a key means of advancing rural health since we began them. We've got to build on the conferences and their recommendations.

Angela Martini and Steve Clark did a great job in analysing the first four conferences. Thank you. They talked about seven areas: workforce issues; education; local management; service delivery; research; public health; and Aboriginal health and organisations, not necessarily in that order. That's a useful framework still. They also talked about four identified stages for issues: firstly, issue identification; secondly, development; thirdly, implementation; and fourthly, funding. I think we need to think further now, we're getting a little more mature in the process of the sector and of funding, and of programs. We need to talk about review, and we need to talk about bundling, and we need to talk about the process by which that happens.

The Clark/Martini paper also looked at pursuit of recommendations of conferences, completing some recommendations, deleting others, talking about linking to the national health strategies, the government's reporting on what they've done, focus on action and recommendations, and focus including time lines. Categories need also to be developed.

What I'd like to suggest today is some conclusions of directions, questions, not answers, at this time of the conference. I think we all need to ask ourselves, "What work have I done with my colleagues, however defined, in health and rural communities and rural health to advance rural health? What can my organisation do to collaborate with other organisations in rural health to achieve the objectives and the recommendations of this conference? What can be done to avoid the splits, the spats, and the distinctions between governments? What can be done between conferences? What have I done since the last conference? What I have done with my organisation about rural health since the last conference?"

What I'd also like to conclude is, to ask ourselves each day whether – of this conference – whether you've made a contribution to the understanding of the way in which the conference has developed its recommendations. Have you made suggestions about conferences and

conference recommendations? Have you made suggestions that could be made into practical, constructive and visionary recommendations?

That's all I have to say today, except be very careful — very, very careful — of anyone with a camera because you too, next conference, could end up there, or under the tree plotting against the RACGP, or with the emu.

You didn't believe I could finish early, did you, but I have. I think that's where we should finish. Thank you.

