

Opening comments

Sue McAlpin, National Rural Health Alliance Chairperson, John Wakerman, Conference Convenor

RACHAEL MAZA: I would like to call to the podium Sue McAlpin, who is Chairperson of the National Rural Health Alliance, to begin our proceedings today.

SUE McALPIN: Thank you, Rachael. On behalf of the National Rural Health Alliance, it's my pleasure to acknowledge the Arrernte people, the traditional owners of this land, and thank them for the wonderful welcome that we had at the sunset ceremony last night. It's great to be here in Central Australia, meeting up with old friends, developing new contacts and learning about further enhancing our knowledge of rural and remote health.

One of the exciting things about the conferences that the Alliance runs is its process called recommendations, and for some of you who may be new to Alliance conferences, recommendations can come out of any of the sessions, either keynote speakers or workshops or presentations or papers that may be held. So, if you have a recommendation coming out from your session, put them on paper and then take them to the registration stand. And those recommendations are then part of the recommendations that are worked up that come out of the conference and then are taken forth by the Alliance to work on as part of their policy over the next 12 months, or as a framework for rural health to act upon; not just the Alliance, but other organisations. So, it's particularly important that we take that on board.

This conference has happened due to the efforts of the Conference Organising Committee under the direction of John Wakerman, and it's indeed my pleasure to introduce John this morning to tell you more about that process. So, thank you very much. Have a wonderful time, and I'll look forward to meeting lots of you over the next few days. Thank you.

JOHN WAKERMAN: Thanks, Sue, and I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners, and really thank both Pat Miller, our Deputy Administrator, and Pat Dodds, for their very warm and generous welcome to us all yesterday.

As the Conference Convenor, I would also like to welcome you, and welcome you to remote Australia, and this is the first of the eight rural health conferences to be held in remote Australia. For the last few conferences, they have been held in capital cities and it's been great to see the Alliance be prepared to venture out into Australia's backyard again. And also the success of this conference. So this is the largest of the eight thus far. So it's great for us to see that we can hold these conferences successfully outside of metropolitan Australia.

I've only got three minutes and I want to say three things. The first is about remote Australia where just 3 per cent of the population lives, dispersed over a very vast landscape which many of you saw as you flew into Alice Springs. And because of where we are, there is a focus on remote health here and on Indigenous health in the program, and in fact this next session deals with Indigenous health issues and we're really fortunate to have Pat Anderson and Peter Sutton with us today as keynote speakers on that topic.

Because of the relatively small population in remote areas and the relatively small remote health work force, those of us that work in remote Australia do think that the particular issues relating to remote health are often lost in the rural health discourse, because we're a small group. But I think they are up front in the next couple of days and I trust that they will be carried forward into the recommendations and actions and that recommendations process that

Sue was talking about arising from the conference. I just want to reflect on John Humphreys' paper yesterday, his excellent paper yesterday, and really his call to arms to consider the big picture and keep rural and remote health on the agenda. And I think that's really, really important.

The next two things I want to do are really acknowledgments. And the first acknowledgment is to the staff of the National Rural Health Alliance. I've said quite a number of times over the last few months what a very professional, well-oiled machine this organisation is. The conference preparation has been led by Gordon and by Lyn Eiszele and you really need to take a bit of time out and talk to the Alliance staff – Fiona, Kristin, Daniel, Peter, Justin, Debbie and the talented Mr Meany up the back. They're a well-practised and very impressive team, and I personally want to thank you and I want to particularly thank you because I really enjoy getting the credit for your hard work. So thank you very much.

The other acknowledgment is for the rest of the Conference Organising Committee. At the beginning of this process when there was a decision to have the conference here in Alice Springs, Gordon and the Alliance gave great licence to the Conference Organising Committee to shape the program, and particularly drawing on the local members of the committee. We have been meeting monthly over the last 12 months or so, and I'd like to acknowledge the work of the committee.

They're listed in your conference program, but I would like to mention them by name because they've put a lot of time and effort into it: Robyn Adams; Stephanie Bell; Jan Bennett; Lesley Fitzpatrick, particularly Lesley for overseeing the refereeing review of the papers that have been presented; Jane Greacen; Sue McAlpin of course; Irene Mills; Myra Pincott; Alison Sewell.

And a group of locals here who also were very active on the Conference Organising Committee: Mark Stafford-Smith from the Desert Knowledge CRC; and from the Centre for Remote Health, Sabina Knight, who most of you know, Jeanne Tahini and Helen Liddle, and Helen in particular organised the site visits that happened yesterday and the feedback from them has been really terrific. So, thank you very much to the Conference Organising Committee for all the hard work that you've put in over the last 12 months.

So, it's been a great pleasure for me working with you all. It's great to see you all here in Alice Springs. I hope we have a very interesting and exciting couple of days, and don't forget that we really do want those recommendations and we want the action coming out of this conference. Thank you.