

To the editors,

Re: Rural Medical Immersion Programme (RMIP)

Since 2001, the gradually-formed regional rural health clubs of New Zealand (Matagouri in Dunedin, Grassroots in Auckland, Country Scrubs in Christchurch and The Boot in Wellington) and the national body, Aotearoa Rural Health Apprentices (ARHA), have been working towards breaking down the endemic myths and negative attitudes towards training and working in rural New Zealand. In the most part devoid of financial support, these clubs have managed to enroot themselves, like the hardiest wild shrub, into the social and educational circles of their respective schools, and have bought their medical students such educational events as; Rural Health Week, suturing and plastering workshops (Get Plastered), Rural Careers Evenings, Rural Skills Weekend trips and emergency simulations; and social events including Town vs Country rugby league, Barn Dances, pub quizzes, barbeques and Rural Olympics, as well as establishing scholarships for rural training. But these efforts have been largely offset by the lack of any ongoing formal rural training schemes for those many interested students. Without co-ordination of undergraduate rural training and postgraduate rural career paths, the efforts of these motivated student groups threatened to amount to very little, as students moved on in their careers, and the positive associations made towards rural careers and training forgotten, as junior health professionals lived in large centres and continued to become more and more urbanised.

Across the ditch, since 1998 Australian medical students have been offered the opportunity to train and live in areas of rural Australia. This has been part of a wider government initiative aimed at encouraging members of their future health workforce towards careers in rural areas, and some twelve years on from its inception, the move is looking to have paid rich dividends. Research from Flinders University has shown that 85% of their Post-Grad Rural Curriculum (PRCC) graduates are now working towards a rural career. In other related benefits, the research has also proven that 86% of PRCC graduates stay in the state they were trained, are 20 times more likely to prefer a rural career than their peers in an urban area and are 5 times more likely to enter GP training (like New Zealand, an area of increasing workforce need). Sadly, in New Zealand, we had no equivalent.

But that was then, this is now!

ARHA are delighted that the NZ government and the Faculties of Auckland and Otago have this year implemented an equivalent Rural Medical Immersion Programme (RMIP) for the medical students of this country. For the first time, medical students will spend an entire year based in a number of New Zealand's more rural centres, learning the realities of practicing outside large base hospitals, and also experiencing all that these rural centres have to offer from a social perspective. ARHA strongly believes that these students will quickly dispel the myths surrounding a rural career, and hopes they will come back to their base centres and pass

this message on. Already this year these RMIP students have been treated to scenic flights and fishing expeditions, have experienced emergency training, helicopter transfers and first-response to traffic accidents, heart attacks and more. There will be many more memorable experiences, learning and social, before they sit their final exams in November. ARHA are also confident that these students will fair equally as well as last years Otago 'pilot scheme' students, who all performed meritoriously in their exams and are proving to be excellent trainee interns this year.

In addition, ARHA hopes to be able to offer a further rural scheme to the medical students of New Zealand, potentially as soon as 2009. Pending funding from the government's Rural Innovation Fund, the 'ARHA Rural Scholarship Scheme' aims to allow 10 first year students the opportunity to experience that same rural lifestyle and training for two weeks a year, across their entire medical school training. The Scholarships will be won by second year medical students, and will involve flights, accommodation and expenses for them to spend two weeks of their holidays with the same practitioner in each year of their training. They will get to train clinically from their very first year, and will build up skills that help them in the future. They will also have the chance to experience the unique charms of some of New Zealand's most beautiful rural locations, and build relationships with the practitioners and districts that may last a lifetime.

ARHA wishes all this years RMIP students well in their studies, and hopes that they will provide the inspiration for future years of enthusiastic students to venture out beyond the big cities and base hospitals, and experience the health care model that supports those life-blood areas of our country. Whether you think a rural career is for you or not, you'll never know unless you take the chance of med-school lifetime, as these current students have done. And to all the staff from Otago and Auckland who have made this happen, and the regional coordinators and practitioners who we know will ensure the scheme is a roaring success, ARHA and the rural students of New Zealand offer you our deepest gratitude.

Keepin' it rural

Brad Stone

ARHA President 2008

