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Rural Doctors Find Their Place

Rural doctors in Western Australia have largely reported that they have ‘found their place’, and generally enjoy the challenging and variety of medicine they can practice through working in rural and remote communities.

This is one of the findings from the “*Finding My Place*” report, published recently by Rural Health West. The report is the result of the first phase of a project being conducted in collaboration with state agencies who are committed to improving the health of rural Western Australians through better access to primary health services.

“Over the last five years, there has been a lot of work by State and Federally supported agencies to administer a range of recruitment and incentive programs,” Ms Belinda Bailey, the CEO of Rural Health West said.

“It is important that we understand what are the current challenges to attracting and retaining these practitioners, and in relation to the current programs, what are working.”

Rural Health West conducted 18 regional forums with 111 rural doctors; 16 one-on-one interviews; and surveyed 152 rural doctors to gather feedback from the doctors themselves on what they viewed to be the positive and negative factors contributing to attraction and retention rates.

“Overall, the findings were fairly positive,” Ms Bailey said. “

“Doctors reported that their rural experience meets or exceeds their expectations, and they enjoy the challenges and variety that rural medicine provides. They believe that current initiatives have had a positive impact on retention levels and will continue to do so as long as they remain in place.”

There were some factors that the doctors highlighted which negatively impacted on decisions to go rural and stay rural.

“Professional isolation was highlighted, particularly by those doctors who work in solo general practices, as well as concerns around families and suitability for rural life,” Ms Bailey said.

“Relationships and communication were viewed as important, whether these be professional, collegial relationships, organisational relationships, or those that are developed by family members.”

The report is the first phase of the project with the state agencies now examining the findings, and discussing options to continue to work together.

“This was a unique project in that we engaged with so many rural medical practitioners, and it was supported by such a large variety of agencies,” Ms Bailey said.

“Moving forward, there is commitment from all agencies to look at developing initiatives that can focus on improving the experience of rural doctors, and impact further on their intentions to commence and continue in rural medical practice.”

ENDS

The Rural Health Agency Reference Group that supported this project includes the following agencies:

Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia

Australian Government Department of Health, Western Australian State Office

Australian Medical Association (WA)

RFDS Western Operations

Rural Health West

WA Country Health Service

WA Primary Health Alliance

Western Australian General Practice and Education Limited

Western Australian Local Government Association

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