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Healthy communities with access to quality healthcare

Rural and remote communities have had more consistent access to quality medical care with a record number of locum doctor assignments arranged across Western Australia during 2016.

Rural Health West arranged 3,423 days of locum cover for rural general practitioners (GPs) throughout the year, which is equivalent to having an additional 14.5 full-time GPs working in the bush.

Tim Shackleton, Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer said a reliable locum service ensures rural communities can access a doctor when their usual GP takes personal or professional leave.

“As we all know, taking leave is essential to ensure we don’t burn-out. Many rural doctors are especially at risk as they’re often on-call for long hours and the nature of their work can be physically and emotionally demanding,” Tim said.

“We prioritise locum requests from solo GPs and Aboriginal Medical Services as we recognise these are the communities most vulnerable if left without a doctor.”

An important part of ensuring rural communities have access to health professionals is exposing university students to rural practice to experience the benefits of living and working in the bush.

“This year we arranged rural vocational experiences for 19 university students across a range of health disciplines to locations including Leonora, Laverton, the Cocos and Christmas Islands, Mt Magnet, Narrogin and Collie,” Tim said.

“We had extremely positive feedback, and one dietetics student who had no prior rural background has indicated he will return to the Goldfields for a longer term placement in 2017.”

A record 62 professional development activities were also delivered to 1122 rural health professionals across the State by Rural Health West.

“We have helped boost skills in areas such as paediatric emergencies, airway management, ophthalmology, cardiac care, wilderness medicine and obstetrics, to help improve the care and health of rural people.

“In addition to our core range of conferences and workshops, we partnered with Lions Outback Vision, HeartCare WA and the Benchmark Group to extend the range of opportunities available to rural health professionals.”

Rural Health West's Outreach in the Outback program, which is delivered on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Health coordinated 3,588 visiting health professionals and specialists to provide 66,243 occasions of service to people in more than 130 rural communities.

"The outreach program enables specialised care to be provided to remote patients closer to home and reduce the burden that travel has on their health," Tim said.

"Outreach also delivers vital primary care services such as screening for hearing and eye issues in children and access to multi-disciplinary care for people with chronic health conditions; services which can significantly improve the life and well-being of people living in the bush."

Rural Health West also supported 18 rural and remote doctors to attain their Fellowship qualifications through the Additional Assistance Scheme and Forward to Fellowship programs and a further 16 who continue to work towards Fellowship.

ENDS

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.