Attracting and Retaining Rural Doctors: Online survey results

December 2014
Rural Health West

Rural Health West is the trading name for the Western Australian Centre for Remote and Rural Medicine Ltd. Rural Health West is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation overseen by a Board of Directors. Rural Health West receives core funding from the Australian and State Governments as this State’s rural health workforce agency, to deliver its core business activities of recruitment and retention of the medical, nursing, dental and allied health workforce in rural and remote Western Australia.

Website

http://www.ruralhealthwest.com.au

Acknowledgements

Rural Health West thanks all the rural doctors and responded to the Attracting and Retaining Rural Doctors online survey as part of the Attracting and Retaining Rural Doctors consultation process and for their contributions to this report.

Compiled by

Sally Congdon – Manager Special Projects, Rural Health West
Sarah McMichael – Research and Evaluation Project Officer

Limitations

Rural Health West acknowledges that the analysis derived from the survey responses reflects the collated views of the respondents and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the rural medical workforce as a whole. The information in this report is current at 30 November 2014.
Background

The consultation process

The Attracting and Retaining Rural Doctors Project is intended to build a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of:

- Strategies to ensure that doctors will continue to be attracted to practice in rural and remote Western Australia;
- Factors that influence the decisions of doctors to stay in their current location or move to another location; and
- Ways in which medical services in country Western Australia can be enhanced.

The methodology for the project entailed comprehensive consultation with general practitioners and specialist medical practitioners working in rural and remote Western Australia and an invitation to doctors to contribute their thoughts via an electronic survey to be undertaken in October and November 2014.

Electronic Survey

The electronic (online) survey was designed in Survey Monkey and asked 21 questions seeking a mix of quantitative and qualitative information.

153 responses received.

Responses to each question are analysed and reporting separately.
**Survey Responses**

**Q1: What is the postcode where you spend the majority of your working time in WA?**

149 respondents answered this question (97.4%).

In terms of the rural towns that respondents came from:

- **Goldfields (25)** – Kalgoorlie (17), Esperance (4), Laverton (2) and Indian Ocean Territories (2)
- **Great Southern (10)** – Albany (7) and Katanning, Denmark, Kojonup (1 each)
- **Kimberley (17)** – Broome (8), Kununurra (4), Derby (2), Halls Creek (2) and Fitzroy Crossing (1)
- **Midwest (23)** – Geraldton (13), Meekatharra (4), and Kalbarri, Wiluna, Morawa, Mullewa, Mount Magnet and Carnarvon (1 each)
- **Pilbara (17)** – Karratha (6), South Headland (5), Port Headland (3) and Pannawonica, Roebourne and Newman (1 each)
- **Southwest (36)** – Busselton (9), Bunbury (9), Mandurah (5), Margaret River (3), Manjimup, Pemberton and Pinjarra (2 each) and Boyup Brook, Australind, Waroona and Dunsborough (1 each)
- **Wheatbelt (12)** – Narrogin (3), Bindoon (2) and Lancelin, Beverley, Pingelly, Quairading, Boddington, Northam and Bruce Rock (1 each)

**Q2: Where did you graduate from medical school at is the postcode where you spend the majority of your working time in WA?**

151 respondents answered this question (98.7%). 83 respondents graduated from a medical school overseas and 68 from an Australian university.

![Chart showing where respondents graduated from medical school](image)
Q3: In which rural setting do you work?

153 respondents answered this question (100%). Six work setting options were provided and respondents could tick more than one box if applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private general practice</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country hospital</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Flying Doctor Service</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Medical Service</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist practice</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q4: What factors originally attracted you to rural practice?

152 respondents answered this question (99.3%). Seven options were provided and respondents could select more than one option if applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From a rural background</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed lifestyle</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for interesting/enhanced clinical practice/procedural medicine</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive remuneration</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical registration requirements</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Followed my spouse/partner</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>152</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is evident that the opportunity for interesting/enhanced clinical practice was the single most important factor identified by respondents.

Q5: Do you feel that your postgraduate medical training adequately prepared you for rural practice?

148 respondents answered this question (96.7%). Only just over half responded unconditionally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>57.4%</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>148</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q6: Where did you receive the majority of your training to prepare you for rural practice?

146 respondents answered this question (95.4%). This data shows that just under 50% of respondents trained predominantly in Western Australia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Australian city</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q7: Is your access to professional development satisfactory to maintain the necessary skills for your rural practice?

148 respondents answered this question (96.7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of those that responded ‘yes’ the key themes identified were:

- Online opportunities enhance access
- There are still important gains from face-to-face events
- Rural Health West CPD activities were acknowledged

Of those that responded ‘no’ the key themes identified were:

- Courses were expensive
- Travel time and distance to available courses
- Time constraints
- Lack of local opportunities

**Q8: Do you consider that you are remunerated appropriately for the work you do?**

143 responded (93.5%) of which 101 (70.6%) considered they were appropriately remunerated, 42 answered ‘no’.

Of those that responded ‘no’ the key themes identified were:

- Cost of running a private practice
- Unsatisfactory bulk billing rate
- Unpaid or inadequately paid overtime
- High cost of living
Q9: Was remuneration an important consideration for you in your decision to practice in rural WA?

144 respondents answered this question (94.1%). This data shows that just under 50% of respondents considered remuneration was an important consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>144</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Q10: Does your employer provide access to affordable housing?

136 respondents answered this question (88.9%). This data shows that just over 50% of respondents identified that they had access to affordable housing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q11: If you answered yes to question 10, was this an important consideration in your decision to practice in rural WA?

81 respondents answered this question even though only 70 responded ‘yes’ to question 10. 65% of respondents indicated access to affordable housing was an important consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q12: What are the professional and organisational factors that you experience in a typical day that make you feel positive about your work?

128 respondents provided at least one response to this question (83.6%).

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 430 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into seven key themes and sub-themes:

- Clinical practice
  - Interesting or challenging
  - Variety
  - Work/life balance
  - Teaching students

- Professional support
  - From colleagues
  - From clinical services
  - From practice team
  - Opportunity for ongoing education

- Valuing patients and community
  - Contact and relationship with patients
  - Continuity of care
  - Positive relationships
  - Role in community and respect of community
  - Patient satisfaction

- Collegial relationships
  - With GP, nurses and other practice staff
  - Team approach

- Remuneration
  - Good or reasonable

- Lifestyle
  - Close to work
  - Cleaner living
  - Climate

- Other
Q13: What are the professional and organisational factors you experience in a typical day that make you feel negative about your work?

125 respondents provided at least one response to this question (81.7%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 391 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- **Paperwork and red tape**
  - Excessive and bureaucratic
  - Medicare billing
- **Employer and management issues**
  - Dissatisfaction with WACHS
  - Poor organisational culture
  - Overly bureaucratic
  - Poor administration
  - Inefficient practices
  - Lack of strategic focus
- Disrespect for medical staff

- Workload
  - Significant issues with on-call
  - Pressure to get things right in time frames
  - Excessive numbers of patient consultations
  - Staff shortages
  - Meeting overload
  - Time restrictions limiting access to CPD

- Lack of clinical support
  - Difficulty accessing specialty services
  - Poor inter-hospital communication
  - Poor communication between primary and secondary services
  - Workforce instability and under staffing
  - Disconnect with nursing staff
  - Professional isolation

- IT issues
  - Slow internet speeds
  - Poor access
  - Email overload
  - Old systems

- Clinical practice
  - Difficult patients (aggressive, demanding, treating addicts)
  - Limitations around scope of practice
  - Lack of diversity
  - Limited access to upskilling
  - Poor continuity of care
  - GPs ousted from hospital
  - MBS perverse incentives

- Remuneration (inadequate)
- Lifestyle (remoteness, housing)
- Other
Q14: What are the social factors that you experience in a typical day that make you feel positive about your work location?

123 respondents provided at least one response to this question (80.4%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 346 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- **Lifestyle**
  - Relaxed
  - No traffic
  - Good quality of life
  - Greater family life
- **Community**
  - Sense of belonging
  - Acceptance
  - Inclusion
- Good schools
- Community support and social activity
- Cultural opportunities

- Relationships
  - Friendliness of community
  - Good relationships with peers and patients
  - Easy to build new friendships

- Environment
  - Great locations
  - Wildlife

- Working life
  - Reasonable hours
  - Good work life balance
  - Good professional relationships
  - Supportive colleagues
  - Flexible work arrangements
  - Interesting clinical challenges

- Feeling valued
  - Patients and community value the role

- Other

**Positive social factors**

![Chart showing positive social factors](chart.png)
Q15: What are the social factors that you experience in a typical day that make you feel negative about your work location?

119 respondents provided at least one response to this question (77.8%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>78.2%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 315 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- **Isolation**
  - From family and friends
  - For non-working spouse
  - Limited opportunities to make friends because people are always moving on
  - Closed communities – lack of appropriate peers to make friends with
  - Limited shopping opportunities

- **Cost of living**
  - High cost of fresh foods
  - Expensive to travel

- **Working life**
  - Lack anonymity
  - Professional isolation
  - On-call/long hours impinging on family life
  - Limited face-to-face communication with colleagues

- **Social and cultural opportunities**
  - Limited local opportunities
  - Lack of options for children on school holidays

- **Schooling**
  - Lack of education opportunities close to home
  - Cost of boarding (financially and emotionally)

- **Lack of services**
  - Slow internet
  - Poor public transport
  - Limited local training opportunities
  - Limited shops

- **Employment for spouse**
  - Lack of opportunities for spousal employment

- **Other**
- **No complaint**
Q16: What regional factors do you experience in a typical day that make you feel positive about living in rural WA?

119 respondents provided at least one response to this question (77.8%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Response Count</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>78.2%</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 295 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- **Environment**
  - Beautiful, natural environment
  - Access to beaches and countryside
  - Clean/lack of pollution
- **Traffic**
  - Lack of traffic and congestion
  - Live close to work
  - Bike ride or walk to work
- **Lifestyle**
  - Ease of living
- Relaxed/less stress
- Safe and quite environment
- Outdoor pursuits (fishing, camping)

- Community
  - Sense of community
  - Community support
  - Easy access to friends/clubs
  - Genuiness of people
  - Smaller, not overcrowded
  - Good facilities

- Working life
  - Challenging and sicker patients
  - Regional hospital back-up
  - Good relationships with colleagues

- Other

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**Positive regional factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working life</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q17: What regional factors do you experience in a typical day that make you feel negative about living in rural WA?

112 respondents provided at least one response to this question (73.2%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>1</td>
<td>99.1%</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>72.3%</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 263 responses were made over the four options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- **Limited services**
  - Limited shopping options for goods and fresh produce
  - Lack of trades people
  - Slow internet
  - Limited public transport
- **Cost of living**
  - High cost for food
  - Expensive travel to and from Perth
  - High fuel costs
- **Social and cultural opportunities**
  - Lack of places to eat out
  - Limited cultural events and clubs
  - Limited people who share the same interest
- **Isolation**
  - Lack of social networks and isolation from family
  - Long travel times to visit family/friends
- **Working life**
  - Long way from tertiary care
  - Lack of anonymity
  - Issues with local management
  - Limited CPD and mentorship opportunities
- **Children**
  - Limited schooling opportunities and less resources when studying locally
  - Limited facilities, sporting options and activities
- **Environment**
  - Heat
  - Weather extremes
- **No issues**
- **Other**
Q18: If you were speaking to the Federal or State Minister for Health and he/she asked you for the top three areas funds should be invested to get the greatest improvement in the health of your community, what would you say?

124 respondents provided at least one response to this question (81%).

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>93.5%</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>77.4%</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 336 responses were made over the three options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- Access to local services
  - Clinical access to specialist services
  - More accessible local services (ED, imaging, paediatrics)
  - Better service integration
  - Improved local infrastructure
  - Closer care for nursing home patients
  - Better schooling
  - Better transport links
  - Ability to get fresh food at reasonable prices
  - Temporary accommodation for people from outlying communities
- Better support for families at risk
- Preventative health
  - Public awareness campaigns
  - Broader reach of primary care
  - Investment in health promotion
  - Improved sexual health services
  - Increase in sporting and activity options
- Financial issues
  - Better funding for doctors
  - Properly funded primary care
  - Improved funding for PATS
  - Pros and cons for Medicare bulk billing
  - Better housing for GPs
  - Better employment options for partners
- Training and support for clinical staff
  - Improve rural doctor training
  - Better investment in the rural workforce
  - Strategies to improve retention, especially of experienced health workers
  - Appropriate FTE levels
  - Better trained local managers
- Mental health
  - More funding and more local services
  - Need emphasis on child and development
- Drug and alcohol
  - Issues of availability
  - More local treatment services
- Aboriginal health
  - Greater resources, including for education and prevention
- Allied health
  - Greater volume and more local services
- Other
Q19: What do you consider to be the top three factors required to attract the next generation of rural doctors?

119 respondents provided at least one response to this question (77.8%).

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<tbody>
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<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>95.0%</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>86.6%</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall 335 responses were made over the three options and these responses have been categorised into key themes and sub-themes:

- Professional environment
  - Need for work life balance
  - Professional development and educational support and opportunities
  - Clinical diversity
  - Maintain procedural opportunities
  - Collegial support
  - Issues with inadequately trained and supported international medical graduates
  - Locum support
  - Better physical facilities
  - Support from other services including secondary and tertiary hospitals
- Remuneration
  - Adequate remuneration to compensate for higher costs and increased hours
  - Incentive based remuneration
- Family support
  - Better/subsidised housing
  - Spousal employment opportunities
  - Educational opportunities for children
  - High cost of transport
- Training
  - More programs delivered rurally (both undergraduate and postgraduate)
  - Clearer pathways
  - Rural learning opportunities for fellowship and speciality
- Community
  - Being part of and valued by the community
  - Lifestyle
  - Good social life
  - Need improved facilities for social life
  - Better internet
- Other
Q20: Has your experience of rural practice generally met your expectations?

123 respondents answered this question (80.4%). The data shows that 110 (89.4%) of respondents felt that their experience of rural practice generally met their expectations. 13 (11%) answered ‘no’.

Yes 89%

No 11%