

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

1st December 2011
Tracey Jacobson

To whom it may concern,

Re: The factors affecting the supply of health services and medical professionals in rural areas.

I am writing to you to express my thoughts regarding the issue of recruiting and retaining health professionals, particularly Occupational Therapists, in rural Australia. I have just completed my degree in Occupational Therapy and I am due to graduate on December 16th this year. I studied in a rural university in my local area, Charles Sturt University in the Albury/Wodonga campus. I chose this university as it was local but also because it has a focus on preparing students for practice in rural areas. My university lecturer sent me the information regarding this Community Affairs Committee, as she has marked my assignments and knew this was an area that I have been passionate about.

As a mature aged student, born and bred in Wodonga, I never thought I would attend university as when I was in high school, university study meant moving to the city. Many years later and with two young adult sons, I had the opportunity to attend university in my local area and study Occupational Therapy with the desire to stay locally and practice my profession.

As I struggled with academic writing and some assignments, I asked for an academic mentor to assist me with completing my final year. I am passionate about the need for mentors in university, but I also started to be concerned with what assistance is available to new graduates in rural areas when they start practice. I noticed during some of my placements that some new Occupational Therapists were young and working alone in rural areas and I noticed the pressure this placed on them, which led to burn out within 12 months.

Occupational Therapy Australia has developed a mentor program "Mentor Link" so that new graduate Occupational Therapists can access a mentor which is a wonderful step in the right direction, but it is dependent upon new graduates to access these themselves, which may only be done if the new graduates have already experienced problems. There is also a cost involved of becoming a member, or paying the equivalent in member fees.

In regard to the terms of reference, I have completed my 4th year assignments regarding the preparedness of Occupational Therapy students for practice in rural Australia and include the issues that new graduate Occupational Therapists face in rural practice.

Terms of Reference:

(a): In my research for my university assignments I noted some issues that were common in limited the supply of health professionals in rural and regional Australia. These issues include a lack of resources and equipment, feelings of isolation (geographically as well as from their profession), the large and varied case loads, a lack of professional development opportunities and the biggest issue is the lack of close supervision and mentoring. Charles Sturt University offered and encouraged students to do fieldwork placements in rural areas and this gave students the experience to want to return to practice in rural Australia.

Occupational Therapists practicing in rural and remote Australia face less support when compared to urban counterparts and a larger case loads which leads to stress, burn out and choosing to leave the rural and remote positions earlier than urban practitioners.

(d): As my research into rural Australia practice showed the most pressing need of having a mentor, I chose to complete a university Quality Improvement assignment on providing a mentor for every Occupational Therapist in rural and remote Australia. This assignment is also attached with this letter. My thoughts were regarding gaining funding to set up two mentors and all new graduates with a computer and internet access to be able to access mentoring on a regular basis. This is in order to provide the new graduates with the much needed regular discipline specific mentoring and help prevent the early burn out experienced by the new graduates in rural Australia.

I hope that this information from an Occupational Therapy point of view is of some assistance, if you require any further information, you can contact me on the above address or phone number.

Yours sincerely,

Tracey Jacobson.