



Submission No. 001
(Dental Services)
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**Submission by the
Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN)
to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Health and Ageing
inquiry into adult dental health services.**

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ABOUT ARHEN

ARHEN is the peak body for the 11 University Departments of Rural Health (UDRHs) in every State and the Northern Territory. Our guiding purpose is:

To lead and initiate the rural health agenda in the areas of education and research.

The UDRHs focus on enhancing and expanding the rural and remote health workforce through multidisciplinary education and training, research, professional support and service development.

UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENTS OF RURAL HEALTH

UDRHs are funded by the Commonwealth to enhance and expand the rural and remote health workforce through multidisciplinary education and training, research, professional support and service development.

As a group, UDRHs have a commitment to ensuring that the health workforce needs of rural and remote areas are addressed by national strategies. A key role of the UDRHs is to provide and coordinate rural and remote placements for health students across Australia.

The UDRHs are the only rurally based academic units that work with all health disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and with the existing workforce.

ADDRESSING THE DENTAL WORKFORCE MALDISTRIBUTION

Health Workforce Australia has commenced a study (the Oral Health Workforce Plan) to examine the oral health workforce. This will provide information on workforce supply and demand to support policy development in this area. The study will look at the size, characteristics, sources of supply and movements out of the oral health sector, and supply and demand projections for selected oral health professions.

A range of initiatives have been implemented to encourage medical students to move into rural practice including recruiting students from rural backgrounds, delivering training in rural areas and providing all students with some rural exposure during their training.

Research shows that a rural background and well supported clinical placements in rural and remote regions can influence students to consider rural and remote practice. Walker, DeWitt, Pallant and Cunningham conducted a study to identify and assess factors influencing medical students' preferences for future rural practice and found that while almost half of students in the study nominated a rural background, 85% of students agreed that their Rural Clinical School experience increased their interest in rural training and practice.¹

There is a need to implement strategies to encourage dental students to consider taking up practice in regional, rural and remote Australia.

BUILDING THE RURAL AND REMOTE DENTAL WORKFORCE

ARHEN recommends the establishment of an extended clinical placement program for senior dentistry students. The **Rural Oral Health Academic Program** would provide supervised clinical training for dentistry students on placement with a UDRH for 12 or more weeks at a time throughout the academic year. Clinical training would occur in the public dentistry

service and students would deliver services supervised by a qualified dentist. Students would also attend other learning activities, lectures and tutorials delivered on site, or accessed remotely by videoconference or on the web to meet their ongoing educational needs.

The Program would be delivered in partnership with the regional public dentistry services, participating Faculties of Dentistry and the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH). Funding would be provided to the UDRH to employ a rural Oral Health Academic (Dentist) to develop the service learning program, supervise students, establish a Voluntary Dental Graduate Year Program as well as contribute to service delivery in their own right. Access to infrastructure funding to expand public dentistry facilities for the program and to meet the relocation costs for the Oral Health Academic should form part of the package.

Once established, the new Program would provide a foundation for the future development in remote and rural areas of an oral health workforce, extending beyond dentists to include dental hygienists, dental therapists, oral health therapists and dental prosthetists.

The establishment of such a program will build on the successful UDRH program and will provide:

- expansion of public dental services in remote and rural areas
- supervision of final year dental students in the first instance
- support for existing dental and oral health workforce, and
- increased access to much needed oral health services for people in remote and rural communities.

Any questions about this submission should be directed to Janine Ramsay, National Director, ARHEN on 62822166.

ⁱ Walker JH, DeWitt DE, Pallant JF, Cunningham CE. Rural origin plus a rural clinical school placement is a significant predictor of medical students' intentions to practice rurally: a multi-university study. *Rural and Remote Health* **12: 1908**. (Online) 2012. Available: <http://www.rrh.org.au>