

School of Rural Health – Monash University Gippsland Campus in Australia

As requested by the Minister, the following is a brief note on the effectiveness of the Gippsland School of Rural Health (Gippsland SRH), in the context of the University of Waikato's (Waikato) business case for establishing a new medical school.

In common with the trends in New Zealand's health workforce, the Gippsland region of Victoria and other Australian rural and regional areas are experiencing a shortage of qualified health professionals. The Gippsland region lies east of Melbourne, covering a land area of 41,524 square kilometres, and has a widely dispersed population of around 240,000, 1.3% of whom are indigenous Australians

Similar to the Waikato proposal, graduates from a prior degree programme can enter the Gippsland rural health post-graduate programme provided they meet the entry criteria. The course of study includes placements in rural general practices and hospitals. The medical training is focussed on the needs of rural communities including general medical practice and specialist areas where there are shortages.

There is limited quantitative evidence of the overall effectiveness of the Gippsland SRH in increasing recruitment and retention of medical professionals in rural areas. However, there is strong evidence of retention where applicants come from a rural background and have an interest in general practice, and a service orientation. Another significant factor is having a spouse/partner with a rural background. This finding is supported by the international literature and has been identified as a key factor in recruitment and retention in the Waikato business case.

There appears to be limited published information on the effectiveness of the Gippsland SRH. However, two studies relating to Gippsland SRH have been undertaken on the challenges and solutions to recruitment and retention.

In 2013¹, a qualitative study was undertaken. Participants were identified from training records over the previous 5 years for the Gippsland GP obstetric training and support programme. Two questions were posed during the interviews:

- What challenges face rural GPs in practising obstetrics?
- What impact has the Gippsland GP obstetric programme had on GP obstetric career decisions?

The major themes that emerged were that GP obstetricians are challenged by isolation, the impact of their job on work-life balance and safety. The participants indicated that the support, training and leadership offered by the Gippsland expanded obstetric training programme helped doctors deal with these challenges.

¹ Campbell, Alison et al (2014) 'Leading the rebirth of the rural obstetrician', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2014, 201 (11), 667-670 https://www.mja.com.au/system/files/issues/201_11/cam00278.pdf

An earlier study in 2011² canvassed the views of mental health organisation leaders on solutions to improve recruitment and retention in Gippsland. The solutions included:

- Providing contemporary curricula and innovative pedagogical approaches to training.
- Increasing the pool of available workers through reform of the regulatory, industrial and training environment.
- Cross-agency collaboration as means to address training and development needs as well as issues of retention.
- Cross-sectoral linkages with external organisations, bodies and sectors.
- More flexible funding to respond to recruitment and retention issues.
- Promotion of the region and the organisation.
- Flexible and adaptable approaches to individual and community need such as flexible working arrangements, job share and part-time positions.
- Professional support and effective leadership
- Adopting models of care that are evidence based.

Although these two surveys are limited and specific to the Gippsland geographical region, the results are consistent with the international literature and show that workforce recruitment, training and retention is a multifaceted problem requiring a range of solutions.

This indicates that the proposal by Waikato University to develop a post-graduate programme with a strong focus on rural practice is only part of the solution and a range of accompanying measures is likely to be required to effectively tackle the shortage of rural GPs in New Zealand.

² Sutton, K. P, D. Maybery, T. Moore (2011) 'Creating a sustainable and effective mental health workforce for Gippsland, Victoria: solutions and directions for strategic planning', *Rural and Remote Health* 11: 1585
<http://www.rrh.org.au/articles/subviewaust.asp?ArticleID=1585>