

From the Journal Associates

Australian College of Nursing Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty: Advocating for greater equity in rural health

Working in rural Australia is a privilege and challenge that all rural nurses and midwives understand. Knowing the community, being known by the community, doing without, yet understanding much, can be achieved through innovative thinking and practice.

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN), formerly known as Royal College of Nursing, Australia (RCNA), established the Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty (RNMF) in 2009. The RNMF is committed to advocating on its membership's behalf, ensuring rural populations are well serviced. Two recent events highlight current initiatives undertaken by the RNMF.

Commonwealth Senate Inquiry

On Friday, 11 May 2012, Professor Karen Francis, Associate Professor Jane Mills and Kathleen McLaughlin, Acting RCNA CEO, had the opportunity to present evidence at the public hearing for the Commonwealth Senate Inquiry into the *Factors Affecting the Supply of Health Services and Medical Professionals in Rural Areas*. At the hearing, they affirmed that rural nurses and midwives are the largest group of health care professionals in this sector. They outlined a number of issues that are impacting adversely on this workforce including:

- Limited incentive programs (relocation allowances, housing and remuneration packages) to recruit and retain rural nurses and midwives. Current programs are not funded to the same levels as medicine and allied health.
- Reduced access to professional development programs due to untimely access to locum relief.
- Limited access, if any, to funding which supports travel, accommodation and registration to attend professional development initiatives.
- Limited access to simulated or online professional development activities.

This public hearing was a valuable opportunity to highlight ongoing concerns faced by rural nurses and midwives.

Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty forum

At the RCNA National Conference, held in Cairns in May, the RNMF held a one-day forum featuring

presentations from practicing rural clinicians as well as discussion led by nursing leaders in rural health care. The rural faculty was fortunate to have Karen Cook speak in her capacity as Nursing Advisor, Health Workforce 2025, Health Workforce Australia (HWA). Karen provided an overview of the scope of activity being undertaken by HWA. Karen stated that HWA is concerned about the viability of the rural nursing and midwifery workforce; HWA predicts that despite current strategies targeting increased numbers of students in pre-service educational programs, this is at the expense of workforce retention.

The rural Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) believes that the workforce shortage will not be addressed unless retention of nurses and midwives becomes a Government priority. The FAC has identified advancing the shortage of rural nurses and midwives as a key activity for 2012–2013.

Delegates and presenters at the forum identified a number of methods that might support the current and future rural nursing and midwifery workforce:

- Improving utilisation and development of online opportunities.
- Marketing rural nursing to experienced nurses and midwives who have become 'grey nomads'.
- Supporting graduate nurses by:
 - Resourcing accommodation and preceptorship models for graduate programs, and
 - Pairing graduate nurses with experienced nurses and midwives.

The Senate Inquiry and the Faculty forum have provided the RNMF with two valuable opportunities. The RNMF would welcome other opportunities to provide expert advice to others who influence health care delivery, ensuring the voices, views and values of rural nurses and midwives continue to be heard.

Karen Francis

Chair – Australian College of Nursing Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty Advisory Committee

Margaret McLeod

Member – Australian College of Nursing Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty Advisory Committee

Jane Mills

Member – Australian College of Nursing Rural Nursing and Midwifery Faculty Advisory Committee