

*Editorial***REPORT FROM AUSTRALIA**

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Editorial Board Member

The major bi-annual rural health conference has just been completed in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia. This multi-disciplinary conference is the key rural conference and organised by the National Rural Health Alliance. Approximately 900 people attend these conferences, making it a very large conference by Australian standards. This conference, like many others, had many meetings of many interest groups and associations organized around the three days. Importantly the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the peak research body for health and medical research in Australia, ran a workshop to gather information on how rural health research could be improved. The majority of the attendees noted that while the NHMRC has broadened its research interests in the past, that there is still a focus on RCTs and that the research outcomes that could be achieved by methods that build capacity (like action research) within communities should have a higher priority.

There is always a good mix of people attending the conference. This year, similar to previous conferences, there were clinicians, academics, bureaucrats and very importantly, students. It is at these conferences that recommendations are made by the delegates that then drive the work of the National Rural Health conference for the next two years. Many policy changes have come from the floor of this conference. I urge you to think about coming to this conference in 2007.

Dr. Martha McLeod was a welcome visitor to the conference. Prior to her leaving for Alice Springs she visited me here in Toowoomba and then spent some time at Ipswich Hospital. After the conference she spent some time with Professor Karen Francis at Monash University in Victoria. It is wonderful meeting with our international nursing colleagues there. Often we are so isolated in Australia – it is a long way to come to North America to talk, face-to-face, with our colleagues. It is always interesting to visit other health services in other countries and see how health care is delivered.

There is some concern in Australia at present that the current university training system may be under threat. In Australia we have two tiers of higher education providers – the universities and the technical and further education providers (known as TAFE). The latter provide education for the enrolled nurses (ENs) and the former is where all the registered nurses (RNs) are now educated. TAFE programs are usually competency focused and most of what we call “trades” (electricians, plumbers, hairdressers and so on) people are educated through TAFE programs. TAFE’s are beginning to explore ways of articulating their EN program to an RN program without nurses leaving the TAFE system. If this went ahead the outcome could be that universities would offer only postgraduate programs. It would put us back 20 years to a system where nurses are educated in a lesser system than other health professionals. As you can imagine, it is unlikely that Australian nurses will quietly let RN education be lost from the university to the TAFE sector. It is a model, however, that would be very attractive to rural people, especially if the EN to RN

conversion program were offered through a flexible delivery platform, thus allowing the student to remain in their community whilst they upgraded their qualifications. In my wanderings around Australian rural communities, I often hear how rural people would like to revert to a program where nurses can be “trained” in the local hospital. As they acknowledge, once people leave rural communities it is very hard to attract them back.

I have just returned from a visit to Ireland where I attended the Royal College of Nursing’s international research conference in Belfast. I found it very interesting to visit the Irish countryside (it was so like I expected it to be) and to talk to Irish nurses about health service delivery in rural Ireland. Of course, being an Australian it was almost like being at home. All of the Irish people I met knew as soon as I spoke I was Australian, and many knew of Toowoomba and most had been to Australia or had relatives in Australia. The Irish, of course, made up a large proportion of Australia’s early white settlers and they have largely influenced what we think of as the “Australian culture.” I envied the Irish their four-year nursing preparation program. We have tried so hard in Australia to have a four-year degree and have never been able to convince the Australian government, who believe that three years is sufficient.

As we come into winter again, we hope that our international colleagues will pray for rain here in the areas of drought-stricken Australia. In Toowoomba our dams are down to 35% of their capacity and the town of 100,000 people is experiencing severe water restrictions. However we are not alone – much of rural Australia is again in the grip of drought. It is really distressing to see trees dying for lack of rain. Many rural people have had no crops for the last three years. I was talking to a friend who manages a large property in New South Wales and he said that he cannot imagine how they will go through a third year of drought. No crops – no stock and very little drinking water. This is now the most urgent of issues facing us all here in Australia – how we live on the driest continent in the world and how we have, until recently, not focused on preparing for the hard times.