

Abstract

Rural health workforce response to Australia's recent natural disasters and emergencies, with a focus COVID-19

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AUTHORS



Shannon Nott¹ Rural Health Director of Medical Services for the Western NSW Local Health District, Medical Advisor for NSW Rural Doctors Network *



Richard Colbran² Chief Executive Officer



Mike Edwards³ Bachelor of Science, Director, Service Delivery

CORRESPONDENCE

*Dr Shannon Nott shannon.nott@health.nsw.gov.au

AFFILIATIONS

¹ NSW Rural Doctors Network, Hamilton, NSW, Australia; and Western NSW Local Health District, Dubbo, NSW, Australia

^{2, 3} NSW Rural Doctors Network, Hamilton, NSW, Australia

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Abstract

Introduction: Australia has recently been heavily impacted by natural disasters and emergencies including drought, bushfire, floods and COVID-19. The New South Wales Rural Doctors Network (RDN) and partners developed and implemented strategies to support the primary health care response during this challenging time.

Methods: Strategies included the establishment of an inter-sectoral working group of 35 government and non-government agencies, a stakeholder survey, a rapid literature review, and broad

consultation aimed at understanding the impacts of natural disasters and emergencies on primary health care services and workforce in rural NSW.

Results: Several key initiatives were established, including the RDN COVID-19 Workforce Response Register and #RuralHealthTogether, a website to support the wellbeing of rural health practitioners. Other strategies included financial support for practices, technology enabled service support and a Natural Disaster and Emergency Learnings Report.

Discussion: The cooperation and coordination of 35 government and non-government agencies led to development of infrastructure to support the crisis response to COVID-19 and other natural disasters and emergencies in an integrated way. Benefits included consistency of messaging, coordination of support locally and regionally, sharing of resources and collation of localised data to inform coordination and planning. Stronger

primary healthcare engagement in emergency response pre-planning is required to ensure maximum benefit and use of established resources and infrastructure. This case study shows the value and applicability of an integrated approach to support primary healthcare services and workforce when responding to natural disasters and emergencies.

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