Rural dietitian: a new frontier

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Introduction

A new frontier for rural dietetics has been created with the recent establishment of dietetic positions within two of the University Departments of Rural Health. Currently there are eleven University Departments of Rural Health situated in rural and remote locations of Australia, that work towards the same common objectives. Each University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) aims to improve the rural health workforce through improved continuing education opportunities for local health professionals, development of innovative service delivery models and research into rural and remote health care issues. Academic staff within the University Departments also encourage students of medicine, nursing and allied health disciplines to pursue a career in rural practice by providing improved opportunities for students to develop their practical skills in a rural environment. The role of a dietitian within a UDRH is challenging and provides an exciting new dimension to rural dietetics. Opportunities now exist to provide local leadership in the areas of evaluation, research and workforce support for the rural dietitian.

The University Departments of Rural Health are required to report to the Commonwealth Government on specific performance indicators in six key result areas. While the overall commonwealth objectives are the same the ways in which they are achieved varies. This presentation highlights the differing roles a Dietitian has in a joint academic/clinical position located in a rural community and is aimed at stimulating discussion for new practice and career options. The presenters will provide an account of their unique roles with discussion of the following common issues.

Community expectations

Local rural communities in northern NSW and parts of south west Victoria and south east South Australia have initially been unsure of the purpose of the UDRH in their area and how the UDRH programs might benefit them. Establishing a presence and ongoing links within each of the communities covered by the UDRH poses a challenge due to the distances involved and the differences between the areas. Communities covered by each UDRH can be encompassed by different state, health service and local government boundaries.

In the initial stages of operation, the Northern NSW Department of Rural Health consulted with local communities by holding planning days in Armidale, Tamworth and Moree. These planning days provided an excellent way to engage local communities in order to judge their expectations and to inform them of the purpose of the UDRH. It can be difficult, however, to meet community expectations, especially in the early stages of the UDRH development when there are limited
staff and students. In some cases the number of project placement options in local communities can exceed the number of students available.

**Local dietitians expectations**

In establishing new rural academic positions it has been necessary to consult widely amongst the local dietitians in order to identify how we can work effectively with the local dietitians and provide appropriate support. Local NEAHS dietitians have expressed initial expectations of being able to have input into the development of curriculum for nutrition and dietetics students, increased continuing education opportunities, research opportunities, clinical support from the academic position, support with student placements and preceptor training.

In the case of the Northern NSW UDRH the provision of a clinical service by the dietetic academic position within the New England Area Health Service has helped to establish strong links between the NEAHS dietitians and the UDRH. In addition to this, a local dietitian has been awarded the Dowdell Fellowship, which allows her to work towards a research masters by being supported 1 day per week by the UDRH. Continuing education opportunities have increased with the establishment of a regular continuing education session, a student supervisor workshop and other one day clinical update sessions, as well as video-conferenced presentations from other institutions. Local dietitians have also had the opportunity to contribute to curriculum for rural dietetic components of the undergraduate program.

The academic position at the Greater Health UDRH does not have a combined role with the local health service, making the establishment of a link more challenging. Despite this, the position has provided the facilitation of regular continuing education for local dietitians, support of student placements and evaluation of nutrition projects.

**Differing isolation factors**

Being a sole dietetic academic in a rural setting can be isolating and both positions have their own challenges in terms of isolation factors. The Northern NSW UDRH is a part of the Faculty of Health at the University of Newcastle and is located at Tamworth, a 3 ½ hour drive from the University of Newcastle. While this distance is not great it still provides a barrier to communication and a sense of isolation. This isolation has been addressed through regular contact with an academic mentor from the Discipline of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of Newcastle and strong research supervision links at Newcastle. The academic position at Greater Health UDRH is a partnership between the Flinders University and Deakin University. Once again distance contributes to the isolation, with the Greater Health UDRH being located at Warrnambool in the south western Victoria.

**Varied role compared to standard academic positions**

Unlike standard academic positions, those within University Departments of Rural Health have many additional roles, akin to community service activities that many academics perform. These activities may include; involvement in health careers promotion to rural high school students, involvement in indigenous health initiatives, contributions to innovative service delivery models, collaborative work with other organisations to improve rural health and health workforce support. The Northern NSW UDRH dietetic academic has been involved in a Health Careers day for local
Aboriginal school children, the provision of additional workforce support for local dietitians and research into dietetic service delivery for rural oncology patients.

**Workforce development**

One strategy to try to improve the dietetic workforce in rural areas is to increase and support undergraduate student placements in rural areas, with the hope that a positive experience will contribute to improvements in recruitment and retention for rural dietetic positions. So far a number of nutrition and dietetics students have returned to the New England area to work after graduation, however, research is required in order to determine the factors involved in their successful recruitment to the area.

Another strategy is to conduct research into allied health services in rural areas and in northern NSW a study is planned to investigate the gaps in allied health services. Once more detail is known about the gaps in services better planning can take place to ensure that the required services are provided in the future. Rural workforce development is also benefited by bringing experienced dietitians to rural areas in an academic position, this adds to the intellectual capital of the region and can lead to an increase in dietetic services through provision of public or private practice dietetic clinics.

**Undergraduate students**

Multi-professional education for undergraduate students is a strong focus of a number of University Departments of Rural Health. Those with strong allied health representation, like Northern NSW and Greater Health, are able to provide these opportunities more easily with input from allied health academics and increased numbers of allied health students in the area. Multi-professional activities may include collaborative projects between two or more undergraduate student disciplines, short one or two day learning modules or increased interaction in the clinical or community setting and/or placement orientation.

Increasing the Aboriginal cultural awareness of undergraduate students is an important objective for each UDRH and in order to achieve this a number of strategies have been trialled. In collaboration with the Indigenous Coordinator at the Northern NSW UDRH, dietetics students have completed standard local cultural awareness training and roundtable discussions with Aboriginal Health workers. Future plans include community visits and Aboriginal specific projects in consultation with local communities.

**Issues and opportunities of joint employment**

The position in Tamworth is funded through the University of Newcastle and provides a clinical service to the New England Area Health Service. This arrangement poses some challenges for meeting the completing demands of the university and the area health service. The benefit of this arrangement has been the combining of roles, such as, providing a dietetic outpatient service and supervising dietetics students in this clinic setting or providing a service for an oncology clinic and conducting research into best practice service delivery for the clinic. The position in Warrnambool has links with Flinders and Deakin Universities, meeting the expectations of each University poses a different challenge with each university requiring placements for student dietitians in two different states.
Future directions

The role of a dietitian employed within a UDRH as an academic is diverse. Such a position provides opportunities in many arenas of the health care system including; working in areas of clinical dietetics, workforce support, research, public health or community nutrition. The UDRH dietetic positions through their leadership roles are able to provide an innovative environment for undergraduate students with opportunities for multi-disciplinary interaction and potential to increase the capacity of the rural workforce to achieve beneficial outcomes.

The future outcomes from the initiatives of rural academic dietitians and their involvement in the support of rural dietitians will provide some measure of the success of this aspect of UDRH programs. Outcomes from further research into diabetes prevention, cardiovascular disease and best practice dietetic services are expected to provide valuable information for the rural dietitian and add to the limited amount of research in rural dietetics arena. The increased involvement of allied health professionals in their local University Department of Rural Health is encouraged, with possible opportunities for collaborative health initiatives, postgraduate study, research and undergraduate student supervision.

References
