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Welcome to Northern Highlights

Rural students sign up to study medicine

Over half the students who entered the Extended Rural Cohort (ERC) streams this year are from rural Victoria. Both Universities involved have declared this an excellent result.

At the University of Melbourne, 18 students were accepted into the undergraduate ERC program all of whom were from rural areas, with 15 from northern Victoria. The graduate program accepted 10 of whom three were from rural Victoria.

At Monash University 16 of the 30 new undergraduate students were from rural Victoria including 11 from the north and five from the south-west of the state.

'We're still building awareness of this stream as an option, so

to have more than half our new students come from rural Victoria is just marvellous', said Graham Allardice, Regional Manager of the Bendigo Regional Clinical School at Monash University.

Associate Professor Graeme Jones at the Shepparton Rural Clinical School at the University of Melbourne, agreed. 'That a still significant number of metropolitan students want to undertake their clinical training in rural areas is also very encouraging,' he said.

This year was the last undergraduate intake by the University of Melbourne, which will now focus on recruiting students for its graduate ERC program. Monash University hits the road again soon to take the message to secondary students.

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New ERC students for 2008

The Extended Rural Cohort was developed through the Northern Victoria Regional Medical Education Network (NVREM) project, an initiative of:



Community Training

'General practice is highly competitive in the UK. Lots of students are really keen on becoming GPs,' says Dr Elizabeth (Bitty) Muller.

Originally from South Africa and now based in the UK, she and Dr Jonathan (Shake) Seigel are both GP trainers and have been touring central and northern Victoria meeting GPs.

'UK general practitioners enjoy a good work/life balance. You don't have to work nights or weekends unless you want to,' says Bitty. 'It's also easy to work part-time.'

That makes it very attractive for women who are now studying medicine in greater numbers according to Shake. Community training plays a key role in making general practice an appealing career choice.

The students are always warmly welcomed by the practices and one of the most important experiences they gain is in longitudinal care. Students take part in the continual care of patients with chronic illnesses. They meet patients who have undergone major procedures and learn their history. They also meet patients in their homes and hear their stories.

'When you meet people in their home, you learn

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**Bitty & Shake
in Echuca
overlooking the
Murray River.**

A Student Perspective: Rebecca Shugg

Getting excited about the future

First year medicine in the ERC was largely about finding out what this all meant for me, my studies and my future. What would we be doing differently to everyone else? Would this affect our learning and experience? Would this affect our choices and our personal lives?

Our two-day visit to the clinical schools at Bendigo and Mildura in September last year was a fantastic opportunity to have all our questions answered by people 'in the know'. Seeing the towns and schools firsthand and meeting the people who are making this happen for us made it all feel a bit more real and gave us enough information to actually start getting excited about what lies ahead.



Country girl Rebecca Shugg is excited about what the ERC can do for her future.

Having grown up on a property outside Bairnsdale, I'm no stranger to country life. That still doesn't make the idea of moving to a new town any less daunting: moving away from close friends who are remaining in Melbourne, starting friendships from scratch with people outside our course and, most important, maintaining a satisfying love life when moving is potentially an annual event! There are no clear-cut solutions, but I think with all the support we will be receiving from staff and each other those concerns will become quite minor.

I was a little taken aback at seeing the amount of time, effort and money that has gone into preparing for our arrival in 2009. I feel really privileged to be in the first group of students taking part in this form of rural training.

Rebecca Shugg



Bright offers students an opportunity to practise a wide range of rural medicine



Bright Medical Centre, Bright

Bright will be one of the 'spoke' sites in the Wangaratta/Alpine hub of the University of Melbourne part of the ERC. This hub will be quite diversified, with a large group practice in the regional centre of Wangaratta, and practices in two alpine locations. These locations will offer a combination of small town rural practice and alpine medicine at the ski resorts of Mt Hotham and Falls Creek. Bright is a small tourist town in a beautiful alpine location, about 70 kilometres from the hub centre of Wangaratta. Bright Medical Centre is a modern practice, staffed by four enthusiastic GPs.

It will offer our students the opportunity to practise a wide range of rural medicine in a small community and experience life as part of the health team. Bright has a small hospital with 14 acute beds. As well as working in the Medical Centre, our students will spend time in the hospital, seeing in-patients, being attached to visiting specialists and other health professionals. We are also planning for the students to spend some time back in the 'big city' of Wangaratta to gain extra experience in women's health, children's health and mental health.

Dr Paul Duff: Bright Sparks at Bright Medical

A couple of weeks back we hosted two groups of two first year students from the Rural Early Elective Placement (REEP) program.

This was a new experience for us, having been used to final year students from Melbourne, Monash and from overseas. We thought we would struggle but what a treat it was.

We were overwhelmed by their raw enthusiasm so we chucked them in at the deep end. They administered local anaesthetics, performed punch biopsies and attended a rural hospital theatre list. One student attended a birth with my experienced GP Obstetrician colleague!

Don't forget, these guys are total rookies so they got a real buzz, but not half as good as what we felt as we watched them succeed. I was reminded of one of our final year students who reduced her first shoulder, under my guidance, at the ski resort medical centre where I work each winter. The eagerness with which she approached the patient, the shock when she realized how hard she would have to pull on a 21 yr-old muscular snow-boarder

and the quiet elation as the offending bone popped back into its allotted place! I also remember her delightful nonchalance four weeks later, when I popped in to the tearoom to tell her there was another shoulder on the way in. 'Nah', she said, 'it's OK. I've done 12 since I last saw you! Do you mind if I just finish my latte?'



Dr Paul Duff

Suffice to say, by the time the punter had arrived, she had bolted her coffee and was standing confidently in the receiving area.

'I'll just get you to suck on this and then you'll feel some pulling,' she began. It was all over in a jiffy.

'Just pop a sling on him and make sure he gets some analgesia, will you Doc?' What could I say?



Helen Cronin
Di Doyle



MONASH University

Monash University
The University of Melbourne

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what it's like to have a child who's had a heart surgery. You hear what it's like waiting anxiously outside theatre,' says Shake.

'You don't forget things when you learn them that way,' says Bitty. 'The GPs are also really enthusiastic about what they do and the students can't help but pick that up.'

The training challenges in the UK are similar to Australia. Everyone agrees more students need to be trained, but there's often not the physical space to accommodate students. There's also the juggle between teaching and practising.

'How do you boost the teaching workforce in primary care, when they already have work to do?

How do you make sure you pay them well enough that it's worthwhile to take time away from practising to teach?' asks Shake.

Bitty and Shake are hoping to return to practise in rural Victoria in 2009 and they're enthusiastic about the opportunities here. 'Here GPs undertake procedures that are normally done in hospitals in the UK,' says Bitty. 'It must be 30 years since I did a caesarean section!'

They're both passionate about general practice and community teaching and learning, which is personalised and holistic. 'We want to open the door for students and say: Look at this!' says Shake. 'Here in Victoria there's a tremendous feeling of possibility, of "let's do it".'

A Message from Associate Professor Graeme Jones

Planning and development of the Melbourne arm of NVRMEN continues steadily. Our first group of students will commence their core medical and surgical hospital based year in July next year.

Some other highlights:

Student selection

Eighteen students were selected into the final school leaver intake and started their pre-clinical training at Parkville in February. Since 17 of these came from northern Victoria, we were very successful in meeting our rural target. A welcoming event was held at Shepparton in late January, and again the sense of excitement amongst the students and their families was very prominent.

Melbourne moves towards the new Graduate Course from 2009, so the process of promotion and recruitment into the ERC will change. Targeting rural origin graduate entry students will present its own challenges.

Curriculum alignment project

This project studies the degree to which we can align teaching programs between Melbourne and Monash. Alignment will give the option of shared teaching resources, for example tutors and tutorials, video conferencing and electronic media.

Practice development

Practice development is progressing slowly but steadily. Our initial funding has allowed funding of development in some of our hubs such as Echuca, Benalla, Cobram, Yarrowonga and Corowa. Budget submissions have been made for infrastructure and teaching funding for the general practices that will teach ERC programs. The change of government and government reviews of all previous programs are delaying a decision on practice support funding. We are hopeful this will be resolved in the not too distant future.

University Teaching Clinic

Planning for the Shepparton UTC is well advanced, with construction due to commence mid-year. It is planned to have up to five FTE teaching GPs in the clinic, along with specialist sessions, allied health and nursing practitioners. This unique venture will provide an invaluable resource for the community and our students.

**Graeme Jones - ERC Director,
The University of Melbourne**



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