

Rural placements can help boost the number of health workers in regional Australia

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New research from the University of South Australia reveals that rural experience could be the key factor in increasing the number of health workers in Australia's rural and remote communities.

Examining the work locations of UniSA health graduates, researchers found that nearly half of the new rural allied health workforce (in 2020) originated from [metropolitan areas](#), with 88% completing a rural placement during their studies.

Significantly, 25 graduates from the same cohort moved from metro employment to rural practice within two years of graduation; most of these graduates (76%) had done a rural placement.

These findings offer crucial insights for a sector that has long struggled to attract and retain [health workers](#).

In Australia, around 7 million people—or 28% of the population—live in rural and remote areas. Despite having greater medical needs, these communities face severe health workforce shortages.

UniSA Department of Rural Health researcher Dr. Lee Puah says understanding the connection between rural placements and rural practice is vital for addressing workforce shortages.

"Every Australian deserves access to quality healthcare, yet Australians living in rural and remote communities experience challenges in accessing [health services](#) in comparison to Australians living in

metropolitan centers," Dr. Puah says.

"This type of research can help us understand and plan future placements to help address the maldistribution of the workforce.

"Our study found that rural placements were fundamental in attracting allied health professionals to [rural areas](#), both after graduation and beyond as they provide a taste of the rural work environment."

The study assessed 264 students who had completed podiatry, [occupational therapy](#), or physiotherapy at UniSA in 2019. After graduation, 40 were practicing in rural areas, with 26 remaining in rural practice two years later (a 65% retention rate). Interestingly, by 2022, 25 city-based allied [health professionals](#) had transitioned to rural areas (76% had done a rural placement and 20% had rural origins).

The placement program referred to in the study is the federally funded Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training (RHMT) program, offered by the University of South Australia Department of Rural Health. It extends health students the opportunity to train in rural and remote communities via a network of training facilities.

Dr. Puah says that the experience and insights gained through the rural placement programs prove critical for securing allied health workers in rural and [remote areas](#).

"Addressing the health workforce shortage in rural and remote communities is a challenge, though a rural placement program may be part of the solution."

More information: Lee San Puah et al, Do undertaking rural placements and place of origin inform where allied health graduates work in South Australia?, *Australian Journal of Rural Health* (2023).

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