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IMMERSION PROGRAM TO INSPIRE NEXT GENERATION OF RURAL MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

Around 160 medical students from Notre Dame and Curtin Universities are visiting the Wheatbelt this week as part of a unique immersion program designed to address a state-wide regional doctor shortage.

The *Wheatbelt Medical Student Immersion Program* has been developed in direct response to Western Australia's acute doctor shortages. With the majority of those shortages experienced in rural and regional areas, the Program has been identified to provide doctors with a first-hand experience of medicine in a rural community.

Over four days, medical students will immerse themselves in rural life billeting with local families across seven Wheatbelt towns – Bruce Rock, Cunderdin, Kellerberrin, Merredin, Narrogin, Southern Cross and Westonia – to learn about the realities and daily challenges faced by regionally located families.

Rural Health West Chief Executive Officer, Mr Tim Shackleton said the Program was developed in an effort to shift student perceptions about rural medicine early in their studies.

"People are attracted to rural medicine as it offers a broad scope of practice, you can build lasting relationships with patients and can provide true primary care. However, here in regional Western Australia, we struggle to attract home-grown doctors and have the heaviest reliance on overseas-trained medical graduates to care for rural communities compared to other States," Mr Shackleton said.

"Studies show a link between early exposure to rural medicine and a willingness to practice medicine in a rural location. This program offers students a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in rural medicine and to truly understand the challenges and needs of remotely located communities," he added.

Wheatbelt shires were instrumental in developing the Program in collaboration with universities. The immersion experience will include three circuits covering the entire Wheatbelt (*Central Wheatbelt, Southern Wheatbelt and Eastern Wheatbelt*) with students remaining in their respective circuits for the duration of the Program. They will visit a number of hospitals, health services, GPs and primary schools.

Shire of Kellerberrin Chief Executive Officer, Mr Raymond Griffiths said the Shire and local families were looking forward to personally hosting the students.

"It's vitally important to our communities that we attract new doctors to the region. We've got some dedicated and remarkable doctors out here; but many work alone and some are nearing retirement age.

"This program is a fantastic way to showcase the benefits and trials of a rural lifestyle to medical students and we hope it will encourage many to consider a career in the Wheatbelt," Mr Griffiths said.

Up to 75 rural families will host the medical students offering them insight into their lives including first-hand experience with the challenge of accessing medical care in their community.

Merredin resident Sally Taylor will be one of 80 community hosts.

“I think it’s really important to support and nurture these future doctors and give them a really positive experience of country life,” Ms Taylor said.

“They’ll also get some insight into what a rural health service involves and get an appreciation of the challenges we can face accessing some health services. I believe it will make them well-rounded doctors even if they don’t return to the country to work.”

“It would be fantastic if these students chose to work as rural GPs in the future. Many will end up working in a city-based specialty, and this experience will give them insight into the tests and limitations facing their rural patients which will only benefit treatment plans and patient care,” Mr Tim Shackleton said.

WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) General Manager, Linda Richardson said the Program is the result of a productive collaboration between Notre Dame and Curtin Universities, Rural Health West, WAPHA and the Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils (WE-ROC).

“The Program is a great example of organisations coming together to make a real difference to the future of the rural health workforce,” Ms Richardson said.

During the four days, students will participate in a range of activities including:

- Visit to the local hospital and medical practices
- Hold teddy bear clinics with students at the local primary school
- Conduct health Pit Stops in conjunction with the local GP
- Visit the Rural Clinical Schools at Northam or Narrogin
- Visit the local high school or agricultural college
- Participate in an activity which ‘gives back’ to the community
- Attend a farm safety demonstration
- Attend a wrap-up community ‘thank you’ dinner

The *Wheatbelt Medical Student Immersion Program* is a collaboration between the Notre Dame and Curtin University, Rural Health West, WA Primary Health Alliance and the Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils (WE-ROC).

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health.