DELIVERING DOCTORS FOR REGIONAL AND RURAL NSW
CONNECT: UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
REGIONAL HUBS

WOLLONGONG
MILTON-ULLADULLA
BROKEN HILL
BOWRAL
NOWRA
MILTON-ULLADULLA
MURWILLUMBAH
BYRON BAY/BALLINA
GRAFTON/MACLEAN
MUDGEE
MUDGEE
GRANTF/LEETON/NARRANDERA
GRANTF/LEETON/NARRANDERA

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DAVID GARNE is UOW’s Graduate School of Medicine’s Associate Dean: Community, Primary, Remote and Rural Health — responsible for placing third year medical students in hospitals and clinics in regional NSW for their 38-week clinical placement.

GSM students are based at 10 hubs across regional NSW and these long placements are a key element of the medical course developed by the GSM, which was established with a clear vision to train doctors to work in regional, rural and remote areas.

Professor Garne helped establish Wollongong’s program in Broken Hill when he was working as a doctor at the Royal Flying Doctor Service base in the far western NSW town.

“I helped set up a program in Broken Hill for long-term placements for medical students from the University of Wollongong, the University of Sydney and the University of Adelaide,” Professor Garne said. “Previously we had seen medical students come out from the city for two to four weeks, but they were basically there as tourists — just to have a look.

“We wanted to make it more meaningful for the students, so they would really get an idea of what practising medicine in the bush was really like. We set up a long-term placement scheme, and Wollongong’s new medical school really embraced it.

“That led to an association with the GSM, which in turn led to the opportunity to come to Wollongong in May 2011 and become involved in running the placements program across the state.”

Professor Garne enjoyed his seven years as a doctor in Broken Hill, and is now focused on showing the next generation of doctors the attraction of practising medicine in the “bush”.

“Living and working in a rural environment can be very rewarding personally and professionally, and that’s the message we try to get across to our medical students. For a start you will have more opportunities to undertake procedural medicine — obstetrics, anaesthetics, some surgical procedures...

“The whole idea is to immerse our students in a regional or rural community for 38 weeks, and help them make their career choices after that. Whether they want to be a GP or to specialise, hopefully they will have an underlying desire to work in a regional or rural setting.”

Professor Garne is also UOW’s own flying doctor — regularly flying his own four-seater Cirrus aircraft to regional centres around NSW in his role for the GSM.

“I have a lot of distance to cover working with groups from Murwillumbah in the north, as far west as Broken Hill and down to the Riverina,” Professor Garne said. “I love flying and have my own plane, so it saves time and makes sense to fly rather than drive to many of my visits.”

THE ACADEMIC

Associate Professor David Garne
DR HEIDI GOLDSMITH grew up on a sheep/wheat property at Coonamble. Her story epitomises the way UOW embraces students from rural areas and helps embed them within country communities through their training.

Dr Goldsmith completed her Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery degree at UOW in 2011. Her studies included spending a year in Mudgee for her Phase 3 clinical placement. She is now in her second year as a resident in Mudgee for her Phase 3 clinical placement.

“Country training gives you so many more opportunities than you get in the city and exposes you to more variety in the cases you deal with – as a physiotherapist at Dubbo Base Hospital I felt I learned as much professionally in three years as I would have in eight years in the city.

“So I really wanted to be part of the UOW medical program. And having grown up in the country myself (Dubbo and Mudgee), I liked the focus that the course had on training doctors to work in country areas and the fact that the School actively recruited students with regional and rural backgrounds.”

THE STUDENT

Alexander Tilley – 1st year MBBS

“I love living in smaller communities rather than the city, so the idea of eventually practising medicine in a small town is definitely very attractive.”

THE GRADUATE

Dr Heidi Goldsmith MBBS 2011

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“ALEXANDER TILLEY was working as a physiotherapist in the Emergency Department at Dubbo Base Hospital when he felt the call to study Medicine. “Working so closely with doctors in the ED, I became increasingly interested in what they were doing. Two UOW medical graduates were working as interns at the hospital ED and they encouraged me to apply to the Wollongong program,” he said.

“They couldn’t speak highly enough of the UOW course, especially its rural clinical placements program. Both interns had done their clinical placements in Mudgee where they’d had fantastic exposure to a whole range of medical situations working side by side with the multi-skilled doctors in the town, as well as one on one experiences with visiting specialists,” he said.

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Our hubs are: Illawarra – Wollongong, Shoalhaven – Nowra, South Coast – Milton-Ulladulla, Southern Highlands – Bowral, North Coast – Grafton/ Maclean, North Coast – Byron/Ballina, Northern Rivers – Murwillumbah, Murumbidgee – Griffith/ Leeton/Narrandera, Central West – Mudgee and Far West – Broken Hill. This experience immerses our students in these communities and gives them a unique insight into the challenges and rewards of practising medicine outside a capital city.

• Over 200 clinicians in rural areas across NSW are engaged in training our students, sharing their clinical knowledge as well as their experience of working in regional and rural communities.

• Building meaningful relationships with communities where our students undertake their placements. For example, communities assist with student accommodation and in some cases have built student houses.

• Encouraging and supporting graduating students to undertake their internships in regional and rural areas, with the intention of completing further training in these areas. An average of 50 percent of our three graduating cohorts in 2010, 2011 and 2012 have done this.

• The development of an Academy of Clinicians (launched in 2013) to offer professional and personal development opportunities for clinicians across NSW working in all healthcare settings, from primary and community care to tertiary specialists. Training is delivered through online offerings as well as short courses.

UOW is one of 16 universities in the Rural Clinical School program that was launched in 2000 to address regional, rural and remote medical workforce shortages. Through this program there are now more than 1200 medical students per year undertaking at least one year’s clinical training in regional and rural Australia, representing 40 percent of the total medical student intake. In NSW medical schools at UOW, the University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, University of Newcastle/University of New England, Australian National University/University of Western Sydney and Notre Dame participate in the Rural Clinical School program, although UOW is the only medical school that offers all students this opportunity.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG’s Graduate School of Medicine is playing an important role in helping to address the shortage of medical practitioners in regional NSW, by producing quality graduates who want to work in regional and rural areas.

A recent Health Workforce Australia 2025 report showed that most new doctors graduating from medical schools choose to stay in capital cities. However, the majority of UOW graduates (an average 59 percent of our first three graduating cohorts) are choosing regional and rural areas to continue their training.

We have achieved this by delivering a program that is recognised for its educational excellence as well as its strong focus on immersing our students in medical practice within regional and rural communities. The fact that almost 70 percent of our students have a background in country communities is clear evidence of our course’s appeal across regional NSW.

Our educational model relies heavily on the goodwill of rural and regional clinicians and healthcare services, as well as the communities in which they operate. Fortunately, we have been able to establish excellent partnerships throughout NSW through our network of 10 regional and rural hubs, stretching from the Northern Rivers to the South Coast, and as far west as Broken Hill.

However, significant investment in infrastructure is needed to ensure that we can continue to provide positive, well-supported rural training experiences for our students.

We are also concerned that there currently are very limited opportunities for our medical graduates to continue junior doctor and vocational training in rural and regional settings – despite their clear preference for doing so.

We believe that a new, appropriately funded approach is required to address this significant barrier to medical graduates staying to train and ultimately practise medicine in regional and rural areas. Our recommendations are for:

A. Consolidation of existing UOW rural clinical training infrastructure to further support the sustainability of the medical student program ($5 million)

B. Support for UOW to develop a rural and regional postgraduate medical training pipeline program which will build on our existing clinical and community partnerships for undergraduate medical education in rural settings (full costing appraisal paper available upon request subject to negotiation about training numbers and training infrastructure requirements).

THE FUTURE

By Graduate School of Medicine
Dean Professor Alison Jones

GSM KEY FACTS

2004: Commonwealth Government approves establishment of Graduate School of Medicine at the University of Wollongong to help address shortage of doctors in regional, rural and remote areas.

2006: Australian Medical Council Medical School Accreditation Committee approves GSM’s unique curriculum.

2007: First cohort of 88 students begins the Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery degree at UOW.

2010: First cohort graduates.

2012: On average 59 percent of graduating cohorts in 2010, 2011 and 2012 continue their training with internships in regional and rural areas.

2013: 70 percent of 1st year GSM students from regional/rural backgrounds.

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