

Update on the Rural Health Network - January 2014

The Rural Health Network (RHN) was launched at an inaugural conference in 2012. This development will be of particular interest to many health professionals and others involved in rural community health delivery.

The RHN enables public health, health and social care professionals to better share best practice, share learning about delivering high quality services to rural communities and engaging effectively with them.

The objectives of the Rural Health Network are:-

- Representing the case for a better deal for rural provision in health services and rural proofing in policy making.
- Exchanging useful, relevant and thought provoking information in order to enable improved public health and health services delivery
- Developing and sharing best practice in public health and health delivery.

The Network provides an interface on rural health issues with policy and decision makers at the highest levels and is intended to have regular interaction with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services..

Over 95 delegates attended the second RHN conference in Exeter in October 2013 with many describing the event as “excellent” in their evaluations.

The conference majored on developments in rural tele-health, diagnostics, tele-care, rural proofing, commissioning rural health services and provided an opportunity to attend workshops of interest to many health professionals and partner organisations providing services to rural communities.

Leading professionals including Professor James Ferguson, Clinical Lead, Scottish Telehealth Centre; Dr. Deb Lee, Consultant Paediatrician, North Cumbria University Hospitals Trust; Professor Sheena Asthana, Professor of Health Policy, Plymouth University; Ann Wagner, Director of Strategy and Business Development, Airedale NHS Foundation Trust presented keynote papers at the conference, chaired by Graham Stuart, MP.

The RHN emerges at a time when there is a wide concern that rural communities are comparably disadvantaged in terms of access to and the range of their available local health services to their urban counterparts. Restructuring within the NHS and in related sectors is leading to greater centralisation of specialities. Rural communities often have a higher proportion of elderly residents, who by definition are often high demand users of health and social care services. Government funding allocations for these services does not equitably reflect this reality, as demonstrated by Professor Asthana’s research which was outlined at the conference.

Copies of the presentations and Graham Stuart’s opening address can be downloaded from the Rural Services Network website at www.rsnonline.org.uk and opening the Health tab.

Conference delegates were enthused by new capabilities that the developments in telehealth and telecare can clearly provide in these straightened times and how the quality of care can be maintained alongside improved patient and carer's experience of services provided in this way.

Cutting edge workshops highlighting specific 'best practice' included the latest on the DEFRA rural proofing toolkit, which NHS England commends to all organisations involved in health delivery.

The demise of the former Rural PCTs group previously hosted by the NHS Confederation before reorganisation was noted as was the importance of having a specific group focussed on the challenges of providing high quality health services to rural populations. Many delegates felt that the RHN was ideally placed to now facilitate this going forward.

Since the October conference good links have been established at senior level within both NHS England and Public Health England to develop better mutual understanding of the contribution that the RHN can make to these respective organisations' roles in disseminating best practice across the health community and patients organisations.

Membership of the RHN costs £150 plus VAT per year includes a Knowledge Hub service providing online dynamic interaction with other RHN members.

For further information on the RHN contact Nick Payne, Rural Services Network via email at nick.payne@sparse.gov.uk - telephone: 01822 813693/07432 599167