



NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.

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Rural Families should be as FITT as any others – but need special consideration

On 15 May - the UN's International Day of the Family - let's consider the special needs of families in country areas beset by economic and climatic uncertainty and the worst drought in living memory.

This year's slogan for National Families Week (13-19 May) is *FITT Families - Families Investing In Time Together*. This is an idea that will resonate particularly strongly with rural families at a time when they are under such pressure from drought, water shortages and the uncertainties associated with climate change. Investing in time together is an important issue for a family's health and wellbeing, as delegates to the 9th National Rural Health Conference heard recently.

It was Rhonda Galbally who reminded people at the conference of the importance of the social and community determinants of health. Evidence from major longitudinal studies shows that having a sense of hope and of control over one's life contributes more to a person's good health than health-related behaviours. The recent Budget initiative to provide additional mental health services in rural areas was welcome, but it should remind us that it would be better to invest in both effective health promotion as well as services to manage poor mental health. The prospect of better health should be an incentive to invest in things like rural economic development, drought recovery, housing, public and community transport, and family services in rural and remote areas.

National Families Week is an opportune time to revisit recommendations from the 9th Conference to improve the health and wellbeing of families in rural and remote Australia. The Government was urged to invest in research into the impacts of the current drought and water shortages in order to provide a basis for supporting behaviours that will build personal, family and community resilience.

Urgent consideration should be given to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The Alliance would encourage all people who support this key social challenge to throw their weight behind the *Close the Gap* campaign being led by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and Oxfam.

Another key issue affecting rural families is the closure of rural maternity services. Delegates at the 9th Conference urged State and Territory governments to reverse this

trend and to re-establish such units where they had closed. The need for mothers to travel long distances to deliver their babies imposes significant personal, financial and health costs on healthy families.

Finally, there is the opportunity for people to help improve patients' accommodation and travel assistance schemes. Submissions can be made to the Senate Inquiry into these programs, and are due with the Committee Secretary by 25 May. The Alliance's submission will argue for greater uniformity in the state and territory schemes for patients' travel and accommodation, and sufficient investment in them to ensure that all eligible families can be assisted.

Patients' accommodation and travel schemes should not be seen as an optional extra but as the only fair means by which people in more remote areas can access a range of specialist services, such as those for the management and treatment of cancer. The schemes should have eligibility criteria that are flexible enough to take account of particular family circumstances.

Good health and wellbeing is the aspiration of most families. It is achievable through a combination of healthy lifestyle choices and intervention as necessary from health practitioners. In their endeavours to maintain health and wellbeing, rural families are faced with more challenges than their city counterparts.

Adoption of the recommendations from the 9th Conference would remove some of this added burden, and introduce strategies for reducing the health divide between rural and other Australians.

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