

# Rural GP Association of Scotland

## Undergraduate Training SBAR

### Situation

There is a shortage of GPs in rural areas.

Experience of rural practice as a medical student increases the likelihood that the student, once qualified, will choose rural practice as a career. This association has been recognized in all recent reports into the challenges of remote & rural recruitment & retention (refs).

The demand for medical student placements in rural practice far outstrips current capacity, and students face many obstacles in arranging placements.

RGPAS (formerly RPAS) held its annual conference on 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> November 2014 in Inverness. For the first time medical students were invited to the conference and a number of scholarships were provided to cover registration and accommodation costs. This was enabled by the RPAS Educational Fund. Initially eight scholarships were offered. However, the response was such that we doubled the available scholarships to enable sixteen students from across Scotland to attend.

Their feedback was welcomed throughout the conference, and it is clear they enjoyed attending. A number of key themes have emerged with regards to undergraduates in rural practice. It is clear that there are some specific measures that could be taken to greatly increase student access to rural practice.

### Background

An unknown number of rural practices in Scotland are currently engaged in student activity. This falls under three main headings:

- **Formal GP placements** – part of core medical student teaching. There is a payment to the practice from the University to reflect the additional time required for teaching commitments. There is a variable level of financial support to students, to cover the additional costs of travel and accommodation. At present, Scottish rural practices take students from Aberdeen, Dundee, Glasgow, and St. Andrews. Additionally there are links to University/Imperial/Kings Colleges in London.
- **Student selected modules/components (SSM/SSCs)** – Students can choose from a wide variety of options to experience areas of medicine not routinely covered by the core curriculum. In most cases the practice receives a smaller payment. Often the expectation is for students to self-fund any additional costs.
- **Student electives** – Traditionally, this was an opportunity for students to travel abroad, and gain experience of another country's healthcare. Increasingly we are seeing students choose to stay within Scotland & the UK, primarily due to financial and family constraints. In addition, for timetabling reasons, some universities are opting to schedule electives during term-time activities, so that not all students are aiming to do their elective in the summer time. Whilst there may be advantages to this, we have heard that students wanting to do an elective in rural Scotland may be unable to do so as the host practice already has commitments to core GP teaching at the time. Electives are usually completely funded by the student, and traditionally

rely on the goodwill of the host practice/hospital to provide free experience and teaching.

## **Assessment**

Scotland's medical schools vary in their approach to rural practice placements. Some seem to be proactive in forging and maintaining links with rural GPs, while others are less supportive of requests for rural placements. Students report that they have had to contact many practices individually, and face obstacles from university administration. 'It would have been easier to organize an elective in Africa!', one student remarked.

In the context of a present crisis in remote & rural recruitment & retention, it is frustrating that students who wish to experience rural healthcare are facing such difficulties. This is particularly striking given the level of evidence for the effectiveness of undergraduate placements, in encouraging doctors to work in remote & rural areas.

The problems highlighted by our students appear to be resolvable. A national strategy that covers both the process and funding of rural student placements is overdue. Agencies are being publicly funded to promote rural practice. RGPAS commits to doing what we can to help students to experience rural practice, with financial and administrative support from relevant agencies.

## **Recommendation**

RGPAS will feature undergraduate liaison activity as a core element of its strategy. Dr David Hogg (GP, Isle of Arran), has been appointed as Undergraduate Co-ordinator for RGPAS.

Specifically, action needs to be taken to:

- Create an effective 'landing web page' for undergraduate students in Scotland. This will be achieved by the development of 'RuralGP.scot', as part of RuralGP.com which is funded by RGPAS.
- Establish what work is already being done, and identify what steps can be taken to co-ordinate provision of rural student experience at a national (Scottish) level
- Carry out process-mapping of the steps required of a student in his/her typical approach to organizing a rural placement, to further understand what the challenges are.
- Establish what support the Scottish Government Health Department is willing to provide in this process. The recent announcement of £40 million funding indicates that there may be potential for administrative support to be provided on a national basis, as well as financial support for student rural placements.
- Identify what work is being done already by those agencies who have a role in rural recruitment: namely RRHEAL, Scottish School for Rural Health & Wellbeing...
- Building on the success of this year, RGPAS will continue to fund student scholarships for its annual conference. We are already taking steps to shape next year's programme based on feedback from students this year.
- RGPAS is keen to work with others to facilitate a 'Want to be a Rural GP?' conference for students to find out more about Rural GP as a career. This may be worth running as a wider event targeted at trainees too.

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