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## Proposed School of Rural Health a timely initiative

Today's announcement by Otago and Auckland universities for a proposed School of Rural Health couldn't be better timed and if implemented will underpin the rural health workforce for the medium to long term future, says New Zealand Rural General Network Chairperson Sharon Hansen.

"A well trained primary health care workforce has never been so important. With the rural sector particularly suffering inequity of access to general practice, it is a timely move," says Ms Hansen.

"This proposal is a targeted approach to solving looming issues around workforce and service delivery across rural New Zealand.

"It's also about health equity for rural communities and delivering health outcomes to rural people on par with their urban counterparts," she says.

The creation of a new National School of Rural Health (SRH) is being investigated by New Zealand's two medical schools at the University of Otago and the University of Auckland, in association with the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners (RNZCGP) and the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network (NZRGPN) in a joint initiative which has the potential to begin to address the country's chronic shortage of rural health professionals.

The primary function of the SRH would be to enable a vibrant and sustainable rural component for all health professional students by building a dispersed inter-professional faculty with its own leadership, based at up to 20 sites located in rural communities across New Zealand.

Ms Hansen, a Temuka-based Nurse Practitioner says pressures on the rural health workforce are historic and well-documented. "With a bubble of retiring GPs – 44 percent intend to retire within the next 10 years - there is a clear need to train more doctors, nurses and other allied health professionals to ensure that the integrated rural healthcare team is well equipped to look after the primary health care needs of rural communities."

Ms Hansen said it is not a matter of replacing GPs with other health professionals, such as pharmacists or nurses, rather there is a need to ensure that more doctors, nurses and allied professions enter the rural health training pathway. This will ensure a sustainable workforce into the future.

The issue of rural health education proposals will be discussed during a keynote presentation on April 1 at the NZRGPN's National Rural Health Conference in Wellington, says Ms Hansen. "This much-anticipated keynote session will be an opportunity for delegates to hear more about the joint proposal and another proposal put forward late last year by Waikato University for a rural medical school.

For comment contact NZRGPN Chairperson Sharon Hansen on 021 189 4391.



NOTE TO EDITORS: The NZRGPN National Rural Health Conference will be held at the TSB Bank Arena, Wellington from March 30 to April 2. The rural health training proposals will be discussed at a keynote session on Saturday, April 1 from 2.15pm to 3pm.

**NZ Rural General Practice Network**

*incorporating NZLocums – experts in medical recruitment*

Level 2, 88 The Terrace Tel +64 4 472 3901

PO Box 547 Fax +64 4 472 0904

Wellington [www.rgpn.org.nz](http://www.rgpn.org.nz)