



**THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE  
OF  
GENERAL PRACTITIONERS  
TRAINING PROGRAM**

**MENTAL HEALTH**

***ADVANCED RURAL SKILLS  
CURRICULUM STATEMENT***

***1997***

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## **TITLE      Mental Health**

### **RATIONALE**

The mental health needs of rural and remote Australians have recently been well documented, in both the National Mental Health Strategy (1991)<sup>1</sup> report and the Burdekin Report, which in 1993 stated:

*“the irony is that in many areas where the need is the greatest the services are the fewest...this is particularly so in small country communities where mental health services are almost entirely non-existent”.*<sup>2</sup>

Rural General Practitioners (GPs) often provide the front-line service for mental health problems in rural areas, due to status, assumed efficacy and lack of other mental health specialists (ie. psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, and other mental health workers).

The mental health issues GPs encounter in rural areas cover the broad spectrum from prevention and raising community awareness, through to serious mental illness. Rural communities have their own particular culture due to differences in socio-economic status, demography, resources, gender issues, high unemployment, resources and high Aboriginal populations. Rural GPs need to acquire a range of skills to provide the services that their city-based colleagues might refer.

Early identification of problems, acute management and follow-up of chronic conditions, will also depend more on the skills of the GP in rural areas. Well-developed counselling skills may greatly reduce the need for remote referrals, and prevent situations worsening.

Rural GPs are also often confronted with challenging mental health problems, often in relatively isolated communities without immediate specialist backup. To transfer acutely disturbed psychiatric patients long distances has its hazards and difficulties. Effective training may reduce the need for transfer, and allow professional supervision in the patient's own environment. This puts GPs in a position to provide continuity of care, which has been identified as a key factor in the successful treatment of people with mental health problems.

Another challenge in rural areas is the breadth of presenting problems, in small numbers, spread over vast areas, which requires sound knowledge of available services and referral channels. In light of the sparse services, the need for innovative solutions to mental health problems is required.

Thorough training in the field of rural mental health is required to enable general practitioners to cope with often stressful situations in the least stressful way, and to provide better mental health care for rural and remote Australians.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council *National Mental Health Policy*. AGPS. Canberra. 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Burdekin B. *Human Rights and Mental Illness : Report on the National Inquiry into the Human Rights of People with Mental Illness*, AGPS. Canberra. p 678 1993.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In the area of mental health rural General Practice differs from urban practice, due to the differing human and physical resources available. These learning objectives seek to account for the environment in which the RTS Registrar who may be working in a large rural town with tertiary support, a one-doctor community in a geographically isolated area, or a remote Aboriginal community.

Meeting these objectives should be seen as desirable for all rural GPs in dealing effectively with mental health issues in rural general practice.

### *Communication Skills and the Patient-Doctor Relationship*

The RTS Registrar will be able to

- understand and work effectively within a multi-disciplinary team in case management
- demonstrate an ability to conduct a consultation in a way which enhances the self-esteem of the patient
- develop good listening skills and communicate empathically with people with a mental illness
- provide support and advice to carers and management team members
- develop counselling skills sufficient to assess important psychosocial issues in relationships, families, following bereavement, and when counselling survivors of sexual abuse
- communicate effectively with children and adolescents
- understand the need and outline the processes for critical incident stress debriefing and develop crisis intervention and conflict resolution skills
- effectively utilise telepsychiatry facilities
- provide health promotion and educational sessions to staff and consumers in rural areas regarding good mental health practices
- understand the different skills required in cross-cultural communication and demonstrate an ability to acquire them
- appropriately use translators for non-English speaking background (NESB) and Aboriginal people, recognising the need for confidentiality.

### ***Applied Professional Knowledge and Skills***

- The RTS Registrar will be able to
- take an accurate and relevant mental health history with emphasis on the person's strengths
- undertake a thorough and accurate mental health status examination
- understand and identify co-morbid clinical presentations
- identify the spectrum of mental health problems and know when and how to refer or manage appropriately
- demonstrate an holistic approach to identifying and managing mental health issues
- identify the early warning signs of depression and of homicidal/ suicidal intent in all ages, understanding the importance of early intervention
- understand and respond to people with dysfunctional personality
- be familiar with standardised patient rating scales
- demonstrate an ability to work with special needs groups
- understand the principles of family therapy, group therapy and individual therapy, both cognitive and dynamic, and of psychosocial education
- demonstrate an ability to manage pharmacotherapy for the full spectrum of mental illness
- understand the principles of withdrawal and detoxification and manage where appropriate
- identify the indicators of child and adult sexual abuse and domestic violence, and refer or manage appropriately
- develop the skills to manage a psychiatric emergency competently
- be aware of the different therapeutic modalities for mental illness and initiate and maintain therapeutic regimes.

### ***Population Health and the Context of General Practice***

The RTS Registrar will be able to

- understand the importance of multi-disciplinary teamwork and the extended role of other health professionals in rural mental health case management
- understand the social and cultural influences on mental health needs and the differing priorities of people in rural and remote areas
- understand relevant mental health protocols and guidelines and, where necessary, participate in their development including the need to use the least restrictive treatments
- demonstrate an awareness of the differing mental health resources in rural and remote areas and improvise when required
- understand the need to involve consumer groups in the development of policies relating to service provision
- be aware of the availability of guns in rural areas when dealing with people during a mental health crisis.

### ***Organisational and Legal Dimensions***

The RTS Registrar will be able to

- understand the state legislation relevant to involuntary admission to a unit psychiatric power of attorney, child protection and abuse and guardianship
- establish and utilise a comprehensive professional psychiatry / mental health referral network
- know the resources available to manage people with chronic mental illness and outline the range of support systems for their carers
- outline how to access the metropolitan mental health - clinical, academic, research, literature, hotline and legal resources available
- outline reporting responsibilities in child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and substance abuse
- keep comprehensive records and understand the importance of doing so
- outline the appropriate protocols for home and hostel visiting
- demonstrate an ability to work effectively with consumer groups and families
- clearly outline the local transfer and safe evacuation processes and protocols for psychiatric patients

- outline the protocols for media involvement in the management of crisis situations.

### ***Professional and Ethical Role***

The RTS Registrar will be able to

- develop appropriate strategies for managing the conflict between the needs of a busy general practice and those ongoing needs of people with mental health problems
- demonstrate an understanding of the issues related to confidentiality in small communities
- develop an awareness of the effects and boundaries of working as a mental health professional in small communities, in particular caring for friends, relatives and colleagues
- understand the boundary issues related to personal and sexual relationships with current or previous patients
- demonstrate an understanding of the national mental health policy and plan and a willingness to improve rural mental health care
- develop skills in balancing the case load and demands of working in isolation in a rural practice
- recognise their strengths, vulnerabilities, personal values, gender issues, attitudes and beliefs in relation to mental health management
- demonstrate confidence to make decisions and accept the outcomes of those decisions whilst working within their limitations
- develop the appropriate skills for self-care and self-reliance including a personal support network and regular and accessible debriefing
- increase community awareness of mental disorder / illness as a means to reducing the associated stigma
- recognise mental health problems in colleagues and offer collegial support and advice
- develop a commitment to continuing self-directed learning and professional development sufficient to provide quality mental health care to rural and remote consumers.

## **CONTENT**

The following content list aims to provide guidelines for the Registrar and the Supervisor regarding topics which should be covered, bearing in mind that many of the common issues

would have been covered in the Core Curriculum. This should therefore not be seen as an exhaustive list, but as desirable requirements to meet the particular needs of the rural general practitioner in mental health.

The content is organised under the following headings:

1. Acute Presentations
2. The Nature of Rural Communities
3. The Scope of Mental Illness
4. Practical Skills
5. Resource Management
6. Self Care

### **1. Acute Presentations**

- taking a mental health history
- performing a mental health status examination
- early warning signs of mental illness and early intervention
- principles of using standardised patient rating scales
- identification of co-morbid presentations
- psychiatric emergency - crisis intervention skills
- legal reporting responsibilities in child sexual abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse
- therapeutic modalities and regimes

### **2. The Nature of Rural Communities**

- mental health protocols and guidelines
- gun legislation and mental health crisis
- working with special needs groups including women's, perpetrators, domestic violence, carers
- protocols for media management in crisis situations
- boundary issues in being a rural mental health professional
- confidentiality in small communities
- family farm transfer - Farmsafe Australia
- safe evacuation and transfer processes - protocols and guidelines

### **3. The Scope of Mental Illness**

- philosophy of mental health
- social and cultural influences on mental health
- mental health promotion
- positive and negative transference
- communicating with children and adolescents
- spectrum of mental health problems
- dysfunctional personalities / families
- protocols for home visiting

#### 4. Practical Skills

- identifying one's own limitations and knowing when to refer
- counselling skills workshop covering essential techniques
- process for critical incident stress debriefing
- communication skills -listening, cross-cultural, empathy
- conducting a positive consultation using empowering techniques
- principles of and exposure to different types of therapies eg. family / group / relationship / bereavement / cognitive behaviour therapy
- principles of sexual counselling including survivors of sexual abuse and transgender issues
- principles of detoxification and withdrawal

#### 5. Resource Management

- developing a professional network
- multi-disciplinary teamwork, shared care and case management
- respite care and support systems for carers
- resources and how to access them in rural areas
- telepsychiatry facilities
- state legislation, power of attorney, child protection, guardianship
- using translators to conduct a consultation
- principles of adult learning / educational sessions
- program development

#### 6. Self-Care

- managing a busy general practice as a mental health professional
- balancing caseload and demands
- professional development strategies
- establishing personal support network - including debriefing access
- identifying personal strengths and vulnerabilities
- stress management.

### TEACHING / SUPERVISION APPROACHES

Learning will mostly be experiential and self-directed, under the supervision of the rural specialist and GP supervisors. These teaching approaches recognise the needs of the RTS Registrar as an adult learner. A combination of teaching methods could be utilised as no single method will suit every occasion. Teaching methods should be interactive and challenge the learner to choose, judge, reflect upon, and evaluate ideas.

Interactive teaching methodologies which could be used include

- group discussion / activities / case studies / presentations
- role play / simulated situations - these may reflect a situation in which the Registrars have previously found themselves and felt unsure about how to manage
- audiovisual presentation - ie. video, films
- audiotaped consultations and video debriefing

- use of screening questionnaires
- research projects
- listening / observation
- regular meetings with supervisors
- access to CME workshops
- presentation of educational session to other staff or consumers
- journal articles
- participation in aeromedical / road evacuation of mentally ill patients
- weekend workshops
- distance education courses
- production of disks listing government agencies for speed of access
- use of Internet to access resources
- telepsychiatry
- residential workshops and/or conferences on specific topics
- meetings with fellowship, consumer groups, counsellors, special interest groups, Relationships Australia and mental health workers

## **PREREQUISITES / ASSUMED PRIOR EXPERIENCE**

The GP Registrar should satisfy the following criteria

- in accordance with the Training Program Operating Procedures be eligible to undertake an Advanced Rural Skills Post ie.
  - ⇒ be accepted into the Rural Training Stream (RTS)
  - ⇒ have completed a minimum of six months in rural general practice terms
- be familiar with the technical equipment required to enable access to available information technology eg. telepsychiatry
- have successfully completed the core training in Mental Health.

## **FEEDBACK AND ASSESSMENT METHODS**

Assessment should be based in the context of the RTS Registrar's work environment ie. if the Registrar is working in a rural farming community, a mining town or cross-cultural context, this should be reflected in the assessment.

*Both formal and informal methods of assessment will be used.*

- *Feedback* The designated rural GP and specialist supervisors take responsibility for providing direct feedback to the RTS Registrar on their progress and performance in the post. Feedback will occur during regular discussions and include the use of diary and scenarios from interesting case presentations.
- The supervisors should assess the Registrar's response to various case scenarios which cover the more important areas. These could be grouped in such a fashion that the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Registrar are identified. Videotaping of counselling sessions, and feedback from peers could be useful methods.

- *Log Book.* All RTS Registrars are required to keep a Log Book of interesting cases, including their management, and relevant knowledge, skills and other information. This could form the basis for discussion with their Supervisors.
- *Formal Assessment:* The RACGP College examination and assessment criteria is outlined in the Graduate Diploma in Rural General Practice Handbook.
- Formal assessment includes the submission of 3-5 pieces of work (duration dependent) which demonstrate mastery of the subject matter, rural focus and written or verbal presentation skills. These can take the form of case studies, case commentaries / presentations, research papers, articles for publication, successful completion of particularly relevant courses or negotiated areas of interest. (Refer RACGP Graduate Diploma in Rural General Practice Handbook pg 8.)

*Those undertaking this post over a twelve month period will be required to provide information which demonstrates the additional depth and breadth of their experience.*

## EVALUATION METHODS

The Advanced Rural Skills Curriculum is evaluated by several means, including continuous monitoring by the RACGP Training Program, the Rural Health Training Units and a standardised Registrar feedback form which Registrars complete at the end of each rotation. The form is designed to obtain ratings on the extent to which the advanced rural skills posts contributed to achievement of the overall program objectives and the goals of this particular post in Mental Health.

## TIME AND LEARNING RESOURCES

### *Duration*

The duration of this advanced rural skills post can be six or twelve months which may be undertaken as:

- one six month block
- two six month blocks
- one six month and two three month blocks
- one twelve month block.

There must be a minimum of one block of six months duration in a rurally-accredited post. Those who undertake this post in six months will cover all subject material generally. Those who undertake it over twelve months are expected to have a more in-depth and detailed learning experience.

### *Staffing*

Due to the multi-disciplinary nature of mental health work, a range of people and agencies should be accessed to adequately teach this advanced rural skills training. They could include psychiatrists, psychologists, other GPs with experience in the field, accredited counsellors in particular fields, mental health workers, social workers, consumer groups and resource people with particular areas of expertise. Other essential staff include:

**Rural GP Supervisor and Rural Specialist** (*the term Rural Specialist is used in the broadest sense*) whose roles are to

- participate in theme workshops in person or by tele/video/conference
- assist in the development, implementation and evaluation of learning materials
- contribute to informal assessment of the Registrar by providing learning opportunities, monitoring competency, and providing regular feedback
- assist with access to other mental health professionals, groups and professional associations
- facilitate access to learning opportunities for skills development
- act as role model, mentor and support person.

**Medical Educator** from the RHTU with experience in mental health work whose role is to:

- assist in providing access to learning opportunities and workshops for skills development
- coordinate and participate in the rural mental health workshops
- ensure learning package availability for Registrars
- contribute to formative assessment of Registrar using clinical skills Log Book to monitor progress
- participate actively in the curriculum evaluation process
- provide advice and assist with access to other mental health workers, mental health groups, and professional associations.

**Other RHTU staff eg. Librarian and Administrative Support Officers** whose roles are to

- provide support as necessary in the areas of distance learning, library resources, administrative support for educational activities, assessment and evaluation.

### ***Training Resources***

The Rural Training Stream (RTS) Registrar will require access to

- Workshops on specific topics including
  - ⇒ Communication skills
  - ⇒ Counselling skills in relevant areas eg. relationships, family therapy
  - ⇒ Critical Incident Stress Debriefing
- Learning packages
- Interactive workshops via audio conferencing, satellite telecasts
- PC/CD ROM
- Library with Email facilities and database searching
- Mental Health Curriculum Statement
- Clinical skills Log Book
- Clinical diaries
- Telepsychiatry facilities
- CheckuP 2.

### ***Recommended Texts and References***

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