

Rural health conference

By EMILY MACDONALD

A DIRE shortage of health professionals in rural and remote North Queensland has seen everyone from dentists to doctors in desperate demand.

A 2008 government audit of the rural health workforce shows there are 50 per cent more health workers per capita in major cities, with 3242 per 100,000 people in major cities, but only 2164 per in very remote areas and 2347 in remote areas.

Solutions include students adopting a more multi-disciplined approach in their studies and greater incentives for recruiting and retaining rural health workers.

JCU Townsville medical student Heather Hanks co-convoked the recent University Rural Health Conference in Cairns which saw 350 students from Rural Health Clubs all over the country meet to discuss the issues affecting their field.

"Some communities are very good at tracking down those allied health and supportive professions such as speech and occupational therapists but others

struggle and they have to refer to larger centres," she said.

"For example, someone with bowel cancer in a place like Ayr, there is no stomal therapist so the GP has to deal with certain aspects of care and they have to be able to because there aren't other options.

"We also need to support our allied health workers so they can work in teams and so they're not the solo health worker in a remote area such as Julia Creek, which can lead to burnout.

"In situations like that it's easy to just say we have a doctor and they can do all these things and then use them and use them and use them until they fall down in a heap."

However Ms Hanks said there were numerous rewards to working in rural and remote areas with some centres finding a great balance.

"In Cloncurry they have a fantastic set up with a strong team of doctors, good access to the Royal Flying Doctor Service and visiting OTs and physical therapists.

"The challenge is to get our students to go rural and remote and get them trained in pro-

cedural care so they can perform a number of roles.

"The nice thing about being a young professional in rural and remote areas is because there aren't as many people above you, you need to do things more often yourself so you get more experience."

AMA Queensland President Dr Mason Stevenson said practice nurses, who can carry out clinical tasks under direction of a GP, were a way to reduce the healthcare crisis across the State.

Practice nurses are predominantly found in rural and regional areas and Dr Stevenson said while he would like to see even more sourced for these areas, it was crucial to roll them into metropolitan clinics as well.

"A recent report funded by the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute found practice nurses helped take pressure off GPs, subsequently improving patient access to care," Dr Stevenson said.

"If every practice had a practice nurse, it would allow each GP on average to see an additional 800 patients annually."