

# Division of Health Sciences

## Rural Health Plan

### Vision

Improving the health and wellbeing of people living in rural and remote communities through excellence in rural health education and research.

### Mission

The Division is a leading academic partner in rural health, working alongside rural communities and iwi across Aotearoa New Zealand, to meet their aspirations for improved health outcomes and systems of healthcare delivery. This is achieved by educating a sustainable, fit for purpose, rural healthcare workforce, and undertaking research that informs evidence based rural healthcare policy and delivery.

### Treaty of Waitangi

The Division's rural plan is underpinned by the Treaty of Waitangi. This is reflected in our partnerships and relationships with Māori organisations and iwi and through meaningful contributions to Māori health and education outcomes.

### Context

Rural health is defined by its context: the special and diverse geography, society and cultures of rural communities. The features of these environments that impact on rural population health include access to social and economic resources, employment, housing and education. Impacts on healthcare delivery and access to services include geographic and professional isolation, reduced access to specialist investigations and treatments, and the challenges and opportunities in health associated with living and working in rural communities.

By necessity in rural areas the boundaries between the professions and between primary and secondary care are more fluid; healthcare professionals are more reliant on each other, working closely and often sharing workloads.

A broad and unique body of knowledge, skills and attitudes is required to contribute to rural health and to deliver optimum rural health care across all disciplines. Generalism is the backbone of rural healthcare practice although it is common for individual members of rural generalist

teams to have specialist skill sets. There is often a greater reliance on basic skills and judgement. Rural healthcare professionals invariably have a broader scope of practice than their urban counterparts and must maintain these skills, including emergency care and procedural skills, with low volumes. Internationally, rural health has been given priority in many universities, with the formation of centres, departments and schools of rural health, and rural clinical schools and research opportunities. These academic rural health entities are frequently interprofessional. There are a number of well-established academic journals dedicated to rural health.

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## Scope

This Plan aims to be inclusive and encompassing of both existing and new activities undertaken by all staff and students working and teaching in rural New Zealand.

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## Guiding principles and strategies

The University's vision positions Otago as a research-led University with an international reputation for excellence.

The Division of Health Science policies and strategies promote health outcomes, producing a health workforce equipped to meet the needs of society, and ensuring that health professional students both mirror the rural/urban composition of Aotearoa New Zealand and are responsive to the specific health needs of rural communities.

Rural health in the Division is underpinned by the principles of social accountability, community and iwi engagement, and interprofessional learning.

The Plan is linked to and consistent with the Division of Health Sciences *Vision and Plan for Māori Development* and *Interprofessional Education Project Plan*.

The Plan is responsive to changes in Aotearoa New Zealand's rural sector and is positioned to respond to opportunities and challenges that arise. Rural health research, policy and generalist skills fostered by the Division may have relevance to other communities with similar contexts. Thus, in the future the Plan may extend its regional and international focus.

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## Strategic Objectives

1. The Division engages with rural communities and iwi across Aotearoa New Zealand forming collaborative partnerships that underpin the Division's rural activities.
2. The Division has a visible rural health structure and identity. This structure is interprofessional, and embraces interprofessional principles in education, research and practice.
3. The Division educates a health workforce equipped to meet the needs of rural communities and its diverse populations, with specific reference to Māori and Pacific communities.
4. The Division undertakes and fosters research that improves health outcomes for rural communities by informing rural health policy, rural population health and rural healthcare practice.
5. The Division strengthens and builds its rural academic capacity.
6. The Division engages with relevant organisations to progress rural health, healthcare systems and health workforce issues.

# Strategies

In order to achieve the vision, mission and strategic objectives outlined above, the Division pursues the following strategies:

## 1. Engaging with Rural Communities

- Rural health education and rural health research are embedded in the rural context and day-to-day rural healthcare practice.
  - Agreements are developed with rural communities and iwi that underpin positive partnerships.
  - Within the context of these relationships the Division works to identify and progress the health and healthcare needs of rural communities.
  - Education and research in rural communities are each conducted in a coordinated manner that respects and supports the integrity and social fabric of rural communities and their health services.
  - Rural teaching and research are conducted in ways that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable.
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## 2. Developing a Rural Health Structure

- The Division maximizes the potential of its current rural initiatives; developing a structure that improves coordination and the efficient use of resources.
  - A virtual, digitally based, rural campus with strong rurally based leadership, links the geographically dispersed rural health faculty and student body. The necessary IT infrastructure is in place to support this.
  - Facilities, virtual and real, with which the Division conducts its rural teaching and research, are established in rural communities. These platforms are interprofessional and built around shared administrative and other resources.
  - A shared understanding of the rural context and the interprofessional nature of rural health underpin integration and cooperation between the relevant programmes.
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## 3. Educating a health workforce equipped to meet rural needs

- The selection policies for the Division's health professional programmes seek to ensure the rural/urban composition of graduates reflect the diverse communities in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- Health professional students are introduced to the concepts of rural health and the rural context early in their health professional programmes.
- Health professional students have positive exposure to, and experience in, rural health and communities that ensure they understand and are able to respond to the specific health needs of rural communities.
- Health professional students who are interested in rural careers are actively supported in this interest throughout their health professional education, including opportunities for high quality learning in rural settings.
- Strong IT and distance learning infrastructures support the health professional education undertaken in rural settings.
- When appropriate to do so, health professional programmes incorporate rural health education methodologies (such as the one year rural medical immersion programme).
- The importance of generalism in meeting the current and future health needs of all communities, but rural, remote and island communities in particular, is fully recognized and there are ample opportunities to learn generalist skill sets.
- The interdependence of health professionals in the rural context is recognized and interprofessional education and practice are emphasised.

#### **4. Fostering and undertaking Rural Health Research**

- Programmes of research are developed in consultation with rural communities, iwi and rural healthcare providers, aligning with the health and healthcare needs of rural Aotearoa New Zealand.
  - A focused and coherent rural health research strategy is developed including an aim to secure external research funding.
  - Research that explores the health and healthcare needs of rural communities and disparities (rural vs. urban) in health outcomes and healthcare delivery is encouraged.
  - Dedicated support is made available to postgraduate students to enable them to successfully meet the challenges of conducting research while living and working in rural areas.
  - Rural health research collaboration is actively encouraged across professions, disciplines and regions.
  - The Division informs its rural education with high quality health professional education research.
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#### **5. Building rural academic capacity**

- Strong IT and distance learning infrastructures support rural postgraduate programmes in achieving their goal of generating the rural health teachers and researchers of the future.
  - The Division grows and nurtures rural faculty by providing opportunities to advance academic careers (including engaging with the wider University), while continuing in active rural practice. This is in line with opportunities offered to faculty working in urban-based disciplines.
  - The professional development opportunities, teacher education and teaching infrastructure available in the University are adapted to the challenges of engaging in health education and research while living in rural Aotearoa New Zealand.
  - Positive relationships are maintained with urban based faculty that ensure rural health education contributes to the broader health professional curricula and ensure the same academic rigor is applied to rural health education and research as is applied to other disciplines.
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#### **6. Rural health and health workforce policy and development**

- An identifiable rural health structure and leadership within the Division facilitates engagement with the broader rural health sector.
- The Division takes an active role, working alongside other stakeholders in national, international, regional and local forums, to progress the social determinants of health, healthcare systems and health professional education in ways that benefit rural communities and iwi.
- The Division shares its rural health expertise with international, national, regional and local organisations seeking to improve rural health.

The Division currently delivers health professional programmes in Dentistry, Medical Laboratory Science, Medicine, Pharmacy and Physiotherapy based on a common Health Sciences First Year. Other programmes in the Division include the Bachelor of Oral Health, Bachelor of Dental Technology, Bachelor of Radiation Therapy, Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences and a range of postgraduate qualifications including in Nursing. A dietetics programme sits within the Division of Sciences.

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Approved by	Health Sciences Divisional Executive
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Plan Governance	Future Development of Rural Health in Division of Health Sciences Working Group
Reporting requirements	Annual Report to Divisional Executive, commencing 12 months from approved date with more frequent updates as required.

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