

AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY LTD

Rural and Remote Psychology Interest Group Newsletter

Edition 1 May 2003

RRIG Committee Report

Thank you so much for the wonderful response and support we received from RRIG members after the publication of our first newsletter in some time. We hope to produce a quarterly newsletter and welcome contributions from our membership. We encourage you to share your experiences and insights of working as a psychologist in rural and remote parts of the country by sending us brief articles. Some of you have already sent us emails about your experiences and we would encourage those people to develop a short biography on the work that they are doing and the issues that are concerning them for inclusion in future newsletters. Sue will email these people soon to encourage them to do this in the near future.

The RRIG newsletter will also contain news of conferences, workshops and other professional development opportunities that might be relevant to members. We will also keep you posted on the issues the RRIG committee is addressing on your behalf. Please send your contributions to Dr. Sue Burney, Newsletter Editor. Contact details are at the back of the newsletter. Sue would appreciate contact by email wherever possible.

Ailsa, Debbie and Sue

The New RRIG Website



Debbie has developed a website for RRIG and it is now on-line. The URL is <http://www.psychsociety.com.au/units/interest-groups/rural> Contents include the aims of the group, issues that concern members, member resources and group news. Some sections are still under development, as it is a work in progress. Please take the time to access the site and let us

know what you think of it. Is there anything else you would like us to add? Do you wish to post anything on the site? If so, please email Debbie. Thanks to Debbie for her hard work in getting the site ready. We will highlight various aspects of the website in subsequent newsletters.

Conference News



3rd Rural and Remote Conference

The 3rd Rural and Remote Allied Health Conference will be held at La Trobe University, Beechworth (in the north east part of Victoria) on 24-25th July 2003. For further information please contact Natalie. Tyndall@vha.org.au, (03) 96962799.

38th APS Annual Conference 1st-5th October 2003, Sheraton Hotel, Perth W.A.

RRIG will be conducting a forum entitled *Visions for Rural and Remote Psychology* at the National Conference. The aim of this forum is to further understanding of the status of rural and remote psychology research and practice in Australia. It will provide an opportunity for members to present case studies of rural practice models, and their visions for the future enhancement of these will be one of the two main focii. The second focus will be for members to present new and relevant research findings on rural issues. The interest group will also present its work and plans so that linkages with the membership are strengthened and new goals set for the future enhancement of rural psychology. If members are interested in presenting at the forum they should contact Ailsa as soon as possible. It is likely that each speaker will have a time allocation of about 10 minutes but this will depend on how many members wish to contribute.

Travel Subsidy for the APS National Conference

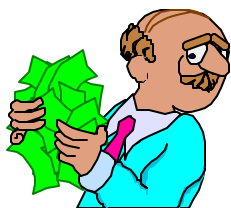
At our meeting last week we decided to allocate some of the Group's funds to help members attend the APS conference in Perth. We thought that this was one way of providing assistance to those members who would not normally be able to attend the conference because of the high cost of travel from the more remote locations in Australia. We are therefore offering \$200 to the five members who we believe are most deserving of our assistance. If you wish to apply for this grant can you please complete the form attached to the back of this newsletter and send it to Debbie to reach her no later than 11th July? We will make our decisions on 18th July and let you know of the outcome as soon as possible.

We also sent a letter to the APS Conference Organising Committee requesting that members living in rural and remote areas be charged the student registration rate to attend the conference rather than the full fee. We will let you know of the outcome as soon as we hear back from the committee.

RRIG Finances

While we are on the subject of money we thought we should let you know about the Group's financial situation. On 31/3/2003 we had a balance of \$3,160. \$1,000 has since been earmarked for the conference travel grants and the rest will pay for the postage of our newsletters and the cost of producing the poster that is described in the next news item.

So where does our budget come from? We receive a \$900 lump sum from the APS at the beginning of the financial year plus \$6 of the \$10 subscription fee paid by RRIG members and \$3 from RRIG student subscribers. At present there are 151 members of the Group.



RRIG Poster

The RRIG executive is interested in developing a poster that could be used to break down barriers to accessing psychological services by people living in rural and remote areas. It would also be used to acknowledge the resilience and resourcefulness of people living and working in these areas, and to teach them about emotional intelligence. We have a cartoonist who is willing to work on the design but we really need a slogan before we go any further. Ailsa has put together some "one-liners" to start the membership thinking about an appropriate slogan. These are:

"Fair crack of the whip"- picking up themes of justice, assertiveness.

"Up the creek"...being in a mess and then working on the problem to solve it.

"Necessity is the mother of invention"--creativity, lateral thinking.

"Local product" being the real and best thing-respecting one's own patch and environment and nurturing it.

"She'll be right"--optimism in the face of adversity.

"Don't fence me in"- to be free....

'Being bushed'....yet able to find one's way.

'It's a bush picnic'- its not so bad really....

Do you think a poster such as this is a good idea? Do you think it would be a useful addition to your practice? Please send your feedback, and slogans and ideas for the content for such a poster to Ailsa as soon as possible.



Working in a Remote Community in Northern Australia: Some Professional and Personal Issues- Part 1 Professional Issues By Sue Burney

By writing this article I would like to share my experience of working in a remote location in Australia and to put forward some ideas for making life and work as satisfying as possible in these communities. In the first part I will concentrate on professional issues and in the second part on personal issues. The second part will appear in the next edition of the newsletter.

The remote community that I worked in has a population of approximately 3,500 and there is only one road into town. As this road is cut off by seasonal rain for most of the year and the township is mostly accessed by 'plane. The workforce is mostly working class and the vast percentage of the townspeople is employed by a large mining company. There is a high percentage of young families and a large indigenous population.

I worked in this community to gain some understanding of the issues confronting practitioners of psychology in remote areas of Australia. At the time I was developing a distance education masters course in health psychology for psychologists living and working in these areas as part of my work for Monash University and felt that this experience was necessary for making the curriculum as relevant as possible. While I had worked in a regional centre for many years I had never had the experience of psychological practice in a remote location.



Professional Issues in Rural and Remote Communities

Managing dual relationships has been discussed endlessly in the literature so I won't dwell on it any further here. Suffice to say it is almost impossible to avoid, as you as a psychologist may have to use the services provided by your client; their children may be friends with the children of a client, and or they may be a neighbour of the client. What this means is that everybody knows everyone's business.

While dual relationships are considered to be a negative aspect of working in small towns because it breaches our professional code of conduct, it can have many advantages. You can often obtain additional knowledge about your clients from other people, and you may have the opportunity to observe them in settings other than your office. Increased job satisfaction is also a reality if the psychologist is able to observe the results of their treatment at close quarters.

There are other practice issues associated with the delivery of psychological services in rural and remote communities that are not often discussed in the literature. For example, living in close proximity with others in a small community

means that you can't afford to complain about your work in informal conversations with neighbours, friends, shopkeepers, hairdressers etc. You really don't have the luxury (as other people do) of "letting off steam" to people about your workload, your relationship with head office and so on, as these people could end up as your clients. Hearing you complain about your work or colleagues may not engender confidence in your ability as a psychologist and may damage your professional reputation in the community. It could also provide clients with confidential information that may interfere with the development of a therapeutic relationship.

Another issue that was relayed to me by several health professionals when I was working in this township was the problem of unscrupulous professionals whose behaviour went unchecked because of the lack of accountability that is sometimes apparent in these remote locations. I was, for instance, told of a number of cases where professionals had exploited vulnerable groups for monetary gain. This was a significant stressor for a number of workers, as they knew this was occurring and had tried to intervene but had been told to keep quiet, or worse, had been moved to another area. In one instance a worker's contract was not renewed after he had approached the professional with his concerns.

Lack of access to professional development opportunities is also a major problem for psychologists and other professionals living in rural and remote centres. Obviously all professionals wherever they might live need access to adequate education and training opportunities, and this is an issue that the Australian Psychological Society needs to address as a matter of urgency. There is also need for research into the rural experience so that evidence-based knowledge can be accumulated.

Many health workers and the one psychologist that I met in this small community believed that their training, which for most took place in an urban university, did not equip them with appropriate skills. This they concluded was one of the major reasons for the low retention rate of professionals working in these areas. Many workers felt that there needed to be a shift in the content and style of training to prepare human services professionals for practice in rural and remote areas. These include training in generalist rather than specialist skills and basing the training in a rural context. This is an issue that has been discussed quite frequently in the rural and remote

psychology literature but to date little has been done by Australian universities to address this need.

One of the major complaints that I heard from human service professionals in the town was that most of the agencies had a head office in a capital city many hundreds of kilometres away, and this was responsible for not only lack of support from peers and supervisors, but a failure to understand the issues confronting workers in rural and remote areas. It also meant that workers often have to wait long periods for case approvals, cars, housing, and renewal of contracts.

Another complaint was the high number of staff working in these communities with limited skills. The "big fish in small pond" mentality, referring to staff with an inflated view of their abilities and authority, was a term often used. Finally, while working closely with other health professionals is advantageous in rural and remote communities there is sometimes little understanding of the contribution of the various disciplines to both physical and mental health care. Territorialism (i.e., "protecting your own patch") can also impede communication and collaboration among workers in any community, whether it is rural or urban, but this can be magnified if you are trying to function with a small number of workers.

Survival Strategies in Rural and Remote Locations

During my time working in this small town I was able to interview a range of health professionals and human services workers. Their advice for surviving and thriving in these communities from a professional standpoint was as follows:

- ?? Understand your professional and personal needs before you commit yourself to working in a rural or remote area.
- ?? Slow down but don't "talk down" to the locals, as "big city ways" are not appreciated. You will need to be less pushy, and work more slowly at developing relationships. To be accepted you must be caring and empathic.
- ?? Share the burden of your work with staff from other agencies as much as possible. This may take the form of professional and personal support rather than a referral source for clients.
- ?? Develop a professional support network with other health workers (not just psychologists) using audio or videoconferencing facilities.
- ?? Create ongoing professional development opportunities for yourself e.g., join in with other professionals and share the cost of guest speakers, videoconferencing, teleconferencing, and on-line chat rooms.
- ?? If you are studying for a qualification, form a study group with other professionals, as working together shares the burden.



I hope that sharing my experiences and observations has been helpful and I look forward to the discussion that it engenders. See the next edition of the newsletter for Part 2.

RRIG COMMITTEE CONTACT DETAILS

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AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
Rural and Remote Interest Group
Application for APS National Conference Travel Assistance
Perth 2-5 October 2003

Applicant Details

Surname_____Given Names_____

Address_____

_____State_____Postcode_____

Phone_____Fax_____Email_____

Qualifications_____

- I am currently a:
- ? Student
 - ? Volunteer
 - ? Paid Worker
 - ? Unemployed Worker

If you are a paid worker what is your current income range?

- ? <\$20,000
- ? \$20,000-40,000
- ? \$41,000-60,000
- ? >60,000

Employer Details

If you are in paid employment please complete the following details:

Name of Agency/Organisation_____

_____State_____Postcode_____

Phone_____Fax_____Email_____

For your application to be considered for support from the APS Rural and Remote Interest Group you must demonstrate your:

1. need for travel assistance funding for the APS National Conference in Perth from the APS Rural and Remote Interest Group
2. active involvement in rural and remote matters over the past 12 months
3. interest in the development of rural and remote psychology services

Costs for the APS National Conference

Registration Fee \$_____

Travel Costs \$_____

Accommodation Costs \$_____

(Please provide supporting evidence for these costs)

Funding Source s

Funding from RRIG \$_____

Personal Contribution \$_____

Agency Support \$_____

Signature of Applicant_____Date_____

Please return completed application by **Friday 11th July 2003** to:

Ms. Debbie Birkett
Secretary and Treasurer
APS Rural and Remote Interest Group
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
dbirkett@sympac.com.au
