

Improving health for regional and rural Australians

Australians living in regional and rural areas (around seven million of us, according to the 2022 census) often have poorer health outcomes than people living in metropolitan areas, including higher rates of hospitalisations, deaths and injury. They also have poorer access to, and use of, primary health care services than people living in major cities ([AIHW 2022](#)).

At Deakin University, our research is seeking to address these gaps in healthcare between country and city, to understand why access to good health is poorer in rural and regional areas and provide evidence-informed solutions.

As Victoria's first regional university, Deakin has a deep understanding of the needs of those living in rural and remote areas. We work with our industry and community partners to co-design research and interventions that empower communities to improve health outcomes in their areas. Our research addresses key challenges for rural healthcare delivery, including access to and quality of care, healthcare workforce recruitment and retention, health services capacity building, knowledge translation and implementation.

Please join us, as together we improve the health and wellbeing of rural and regional Australians.

Deakin Rural Health

Deakin Rural Health was formed in 2016 as part of the Commonwealth Government's Rural Health Multi-Disciplinary Training Program (RHMT), a national initiative to build and sustain the rural health workforce by supporting training and research programs throughout rural and remote Australia. It's one of 15 University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) groups around Australia supported by the Australian Rural Health Education Network (ARHEN). UDRHs are the only rurally-based academic facilities that work with all health disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and the current workforce.

Research at Deakin Rural Health has four themes: Indigenous health, chronic disease prevention and management, patient safety and health service delivery. Its multidisciplinary research team has extensive experience in allied health, primary care and mental health services. The team has expertise in process evaluation; implementation research and quality improvement; systematic reviews; primary care intervention research; qualitative research; data linkage; and geographical information systems.



The team is also working to understand and address the causes of rural and regional health workforce shortages through the Nursing and Allied Health Graduate Outcome Tracking (NAHGOT) study. This collaborative longitudinal prospective cohort study aims to address the shortages of nurses and allied health professionals in rural and regional Australia. NAGHOT study findings will be used to inform education programs and workforce planning, particularly in non-metropolitan settings. These will support better health service planning and ultimately improve health outcomes for regional, rural and remote communities.

DELIVER

Healthcare for older people living in rural and regional western Victoria could look very different within five years, thanks to a new research project funded through the Federal Government Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF).

The \$9M DELIVER project aims to improve health outcomes for older Australians in regional, rural and remote areas with feasibility-tested interventions to improve the timeliness, accessibility to and integration of care. This should also result in fewer avoidable hospitalisations and improved patient experience.

Led by the Western Alliance Academic Health Science Centre (Western Alliance), of which Deakin is a major partner, in partnership with healthcare consumers, regional and rural health services, universities and primary healthcare providers across western Victoria, DELIVER will develop a suite of programs to improve care for people who frequently present to the Emergency Department and extend and improve in-home healthcare, including cancer care at home.

Project Director Alfred Deakin Professor Anna Peeters is Principal Research Translation Investigator at Western Alliance and Director of Deakin's Institute for Health Transformation. Professor Peeters said DELIVER would address key challenges to providing sustainable and effective home-based care to older people in rural areas, initially in Western Victoria but with potential to deliver tested programs nationally.



National Centre for Farmer Health

The National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) is a partnership between Deakin and the Western District Health Service. Based in the rural town of Hamilton, Victoria, NCFH delivers university research, education and training, and health services direct to the rural community. NCFH works with other academic institutions, health care providers, the agriculture industry and community to improve the quality, effectiveness, and appropriateness of health care for rural and regional populations.

The Centre focuses on areas where research can make a difference in reducing illness and injury among farmers, agricultural workers and their families. One of its primary goals is to further investigate the identified health issues from earlier research and develop interventions that positively impact the lives of Australian farmers.

Current projects include:

- The Primary Producer Knowledge Network (PPKN) (2020-2023), which works with farmers and industry partners to co-design, develop and evaluate strategies to foster sustainable change across primary industries (including a digital platform, podcast series, social media messaging and capacity building activities). The project takes a holistic primary prevention approach to address workplace-related factors impacting primary producers' health, wellbeing and safety. PPKN is a partnership with Western District Health Service, Deakin, Griffith University, University of SA and Cath Cosgrave Consulting and is funded by WorkSafe Victoria's WorkWell Mental Health Improvement Fund.
- 'Injury risk and safety behaviours of children in rural Victoria' (2020-2023) explores the safety measures, risk-taking behaviours and common activities of children on farms—from the perspective of both parents and children. Understanding common hazardous exposures will assist in the development of targeted interventions to improve farm safety for children.
- With initial funding from the Western Victoria Primary Health Network, 'Co-designing a peer-supported approach to improve mental health in rural farming communities' is working with farming community members and rural stakeholders to develop a framework for the delivery of peer-led, evidenced-based psychological therapy to farming community members experiencing depression or psychological/situational distress.

I-Heart

Research shows that heart failure has a higher rate of mortality and leads to poorer quality of life for regional Victorians. The 'I-HEART: Implementation of Heart Failure Guidelines in Regional Australia' project, funded by NHMRC over five years, aims to reduce re-hospitalisations and improve survival and recovery in regional Australians diagnosed with heart failure.

The \$5 million project, led by Professor Andrea Driscoll from Deakin's Institute for Health Transformation's Quality and Patient Safety Research Centre (QPS), will improve access to heart failure specialist services to create seamless integrated care and build workforce capacity to create specialist heart failure networks.

Working with six regional hospitals, the research team will oversee several initiatives to improve patient outcomes, co-design new systems of care for in-hospital management and build workforce capacity.

Funding partners in the project are: Albury Wodonga Health, Colac Area Health, National Heart Foundation, Austin Health, Swan Hill District Health, Department of Health VIC, South West Healthcare, East Grampians Health Service, HCF Foundation, Novartis Australia, Western Alliance, Western and Murray Primary Health Networks, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne and Castlemaine Health.

RURAL-HEART, a project funded by the Federal Department of Health, will allow Prof. Driscoll to extend her work in regional Australia into primary care. She will work with primary care practices to improve transitional care for people diagnosed with heart failure and recently discharged from their local regional hospital by redesigning processes of care and co-designing new systems of care to improve services and outcomes.

Centre for Rural Emergency Medicine

The Centre for Rural Emergency Medicine (CREM) is a partnership between the Victorian Government, Portland District Health, South West Healthcare (Warrnambool), Alcoa of Australia and Deakin's School of Medicine and is funded by Alcoa, the Victorian Government and both health services.

Research at CREM focuses on the difference between clinical outcomes in rural and metropolitan areas, especially outcomes for cardiac emergencies and head injuries.

If you'd like to join Deakin and our partners as we work to improve healthcare for rural and regional Australians, contact:

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