PRESS RELEASE New Zealand Rural General Practice Network, February 26, for immediate use

Tokoroa GP’s salary offer far from the norm in rural general practice

Recent publicity around a Tokoroa GP’s bid to attract a doctor to the town with a $400,000 salary package does not present a realistic picture of general practice across rural New Zealand. A more realistic salary range matched to a manageable workload including reasonable after hours rosters would be between $NZ150,000 and $NZ230,000, says New Zealand Rural General Practice Network chief executive Dalton Kelly.

Recruiting GPs to work in rural NZ has been the Network’s core role through its recruitment division NZLocums for almost two decades. The service is one of a number of initiatives to address issues of GP and Nurse Practitioner recruitment, retention, succession and training undertaken by the Network and others in the sector to attract and retain doctors and nurses to work and live in rural New Zealand, says Mr Kelly.

“Many successful short-term locum GP placements and a number of permanent placements are made year by year, but there remain rural locations around the country where it is difficult to attract people to live and work. Many rural GPs are also reaching retirement age and face a similar situation in finding someone to work or take over their practice.

“There can be a range of reasons for this, including housing, schools, social facilities, salary, limited or lack broadband and isolation. These are issues we have grappled with for decades,” says Mr Kelly. “Dr Alan Kenny has loyally served the Tokoroa community as a GP for about 30 years and is ready to retire. Like many other rural practices up and down the country, he would like to attract a GP to join the practice with a view to eventually take over his business. However, the reality for Alan and many similar rural practices is that it has become harder to find doctors who are looking to make this type of long-term commitment to a rural business and community,” says Mr Kelly.

“In response to this, many practices have looked to different models of care and practice ownership structures. While this has been very successful in some areas, it has not been a feasible or attractive option for others.”

Several successful initiatives have been taken over the years to address the impending workforce crisis in rural health. The number of government funded places at medical schools have increased year on year and work has been ongoing to attract junior doctors into general practice through restructuring general practice training and including compulsory community placements during the training period.

In order to attract more doctors specifically to rural areas, initiatives such as the Rural Origins Medical Preferential Entry Scheme (now known as the Regional/Rural Admission Scheme), the rural Immersion Programme and the Pukawakawa programme have been successfully adopted. On-going promotion and advocacy for support and development of pathways and training towards careers in rural general practice have been at the forefront of the New Zealand Rural General Practice Network’s objectives.

Since late 2015, the Network has been successfully trialling a rural student mentor scheme with 10 medical and nursing students now paired up with a practising rural health professional to provide support and encouragement during their study.

Mr Kelly says the NZLocums Government recruitment contract has been extremely successful in providing short, two week breaks for many rural GPs each year and has expanded to include a
service to recruit doctors to work in rural practice on longer term contracts. This service has become critical in supporting many of the practices that are struggling to attract GPs to fill vacant positions. “The majority of the doctors working through our service are International Medical Graduates (IMGs) and many of them come to New Zealand with a view to gaining experience practising in a different health system, they might stay for a period of six months through to two years. NZLocums also facilitated a number of IMGs with their permanent relocation to New Zealand, in these cases they have been appointed into permanent positions and settled into life as a rural GP.”

For more information contact NZRGPN chief executive Dalton Kelly, telephone 027 231 0067.

NOTE TO EDITORS

Additional information:
During the year ended 30 June, 2015, 67 doctors attended the NZLocums three-day Orientation Course. Of these, 10 were placed in rural practice on permanent contracts and the remainder were included in our pool of locums that filled some 50 long-term positions and 115 short term (2 week Locum Support) placements.
The total number of vacancies for permanent GPs in rural general practice obviously fluctuates on a daily basis. However a snap shot of the figures at the end of each quarter reveals the following:

- 30 Sep 2014 - 43
- 31 Dec 2014 - 41
- 31 March 2015 - 45