



16 APR, 2024

Connecting doctors

Swan Hill Guardian, Swan Hill



Page 1 of 2

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A PARTNERSHIP program that includes Swan Hill District Health and Kerang District Health will attempt to address issues across the Loddon and Mallee regions in recruiting and retaining medical staff.

As health services in regional areas battle with shrinking workforces, the Connecting the Docs initiative hopes to link doctors in the region to support and resources in north-west Victoria.

Established in 2022, Connecting the Docs was formed to identify and overcome the unique challenges faced by doctors in rural communities and to take a person-centered approach to their issues.

Founding members also include Echuca Regional Health, East Wimmera Health, Mallee District Aboriginal Services, Mildura Base Public Hospital and Northern District Community Health.

Members of the program gathered on Wednesday at SHDH's staff-education centre to speak about the program and launch a new website.

The website provides direct links to key organisations and resources relevant to those with a career in health care to ensure doctors have a sustainable career path.

SHDH executive director of medical services Associate Professor Rex Prabhu is part of the program's steering committee and said it was important "to show that we are invested in the local health professionals here in our region."

"At the end of the day, we don't want to see those professionals moving out of the region," he said.

"We know what keeps medical professionals grounded to a rural area is often their sense of belonging to the community and having the opportunities to train. If they don't have those opportunities, then they often leave the region.

"Sometimes working in regional communities can be isolating, and to break those barriers and bring them together for common educational or networking events is what we want to do.

"We hope to retain not only the professionals but their families as well." One key issue is the flexibility of work in the medical field, with the program aiming to enable doctors to fit family and personal time in with a busy career.

The program also takes into account the frequency of doctors having to travel from metropolitan areas or interstate or even move countries for the job.

Prof Prabhu said he believed Swan Hill often didn't market itself well enough to prospective doctors.

"Swan Hill is such a lovely place to work and to live," he said.

"It's peaceful and it's a fantastic place to raise a family. We have great schools here.

"But there's not a lot of opportunities for young professionals to meet with one another and exchange ideas.

"We are decent-sized organisations with very varied primary care and a bit of specialist overlay in most of our hospitals.

"We can cater to those training requirements for medical professionals in the region.

"We now have a full medical school here in Swan Hill where doctors can train from third year onwards.

"That means they can now do a lot of their training in the region.

"I think the future is bright. We are keen to select local students into this cohort so they can complete their entire training with us and serve the community for years to come."



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Page 2 of 2



Back: Mallee District Aboriginal Services director of health and clinical service Kelly Dart, Connecting the Docs project lead Gemma Bilardi, Kerang District Health chief executive Kellie Byron-Gray, Northern Districts Community Health chief executive Margaret McDonald and MDAS acting chief executive Marie Griffiths. **Front:** East Wimmera Health Service chief executive Trevor Adem, Mildura Base Public Hospital chief medical officer Louise Litten, Swan Hill District Health executive director of medical services Associate Professor Rex Prabhu, Murray PHN integrated health network project lead Nerida Hyett and Victorian Rural Generalist Program Loddon Mallee regional co-ordinator Craig Canham.