“Exceptional” rural specialist named Rural Doctor of the Year

A rural specialist obstetrician who has provided decades of exceptional service to the community of Albury-Wodonga on the NSW-Victorian border, and also helped establish a national locum scheme to support overworked rural obstetricians, is the recipient of the Westpac RDAA Rural Doctor of the Year Award for 2010.

Dr Pieter Mourik received the award at a gala dinner at Rural Medicine Australia 2010, the national conference of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) and Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRMM), held in Hobart on Saturday night.

RDAA President, Dr Nola Maxfield, said the award recognises Pieter’s outstanding service and commitment to rural medicine and rural Australians, both at a local level in Albury-Wodonga and also nationally through his role in establishing the highly successful Specialist Obstetricians Locum Scheme (SOLS) with RDAA’s Rural Specialists Group, the Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG) and NSW Rural Doctors Network.

“Pieter is one of those rural doctors whose enthusiasm for rural medicine and rural Australia is highly infectious and never tires” Dr Maxfield said.


“Four years later, having commenced private practice as a solo rural specialist obstetrician in Albury-Wodonga, he developed a unique model of care where, instead of competing with the local GP obstetricians for normal deliveries, he provided consultant support. The GP workforce flourished and to this day Wodonga is unique in Australia, with 13 enthusiastic GPs on the obstetric roster supported by 4 specialist obstetricians. As a result Wodonga has become a popular training hospital for RANZCOG’s Diploma and Advanced Diploma of Obstetrics.

“Pieter is also an enthusiastic medical teacher. He has chaired many rural obstetric education meetings and presented talks to GP obstetricians all over Australia on managing obstetric emergencies.

“Additionally, hundreds of medical students have benefitted from Pieter’s engaging tuition and mentorship—as well as being introduced to things like bushwalking, trout fishing and other non-curricular activities that make life as a country doctor so attractive. Pieter’s enormous enthusiasm for rural medicine and obstetrics is always evident and many students have chosen a career in rural medicine as a result of his positive influence. Today Pieter heads the obstetric department at the Albury campus of the University of NSW’s Rural Medical School.

“Pieter has also been closely involved in the development of the local Border Medical Association (BMA) scholarship scheme established in 1992 to provide financial support and mentorship to local high school graduates accepted into medicine, and he has also been a very active participant in the establishment of the Border Medical Recruitment Taskforce, an organisation working to boost the number of doctors in the Albury-Wodonga region.

“At a national level, it was Pieter’s enthusiasm, dedication and close involvement in the establishment of the Specialist Obstetricians Locum Scheme (SOLS) in 2005 that makes him such a worthwhile recipient of this award...indeed, the establishment of SOLS was Pieter’s brainchild at the outset.
“When it was first implemented, SOLS helped match rural specialist obstetricians requiring locum support for much-needed study or recreation leave with specialist obstetricians who were available to provide that support. Funding was provided by the Federal Government to fund these locums for 14 days each year.

“Pieter went to Kalgoorlie as the first SOLS locum and showed how much money the local hospital saved by avoiding emergency patient transfers to Perth during the resident specialist’s absence.

“SOLS was so successful that it has now been expanded (with additional Federal Government funding) to also provide locum support to rural GP obstetricians and rural GP anaesthetists.

“In short, Pieter has been a tireless and enthusiastic campaigner for rural doctors all over Australia, not to mention a dedicated doctor to the Albury-Wodonga community. His positive influence will endure for many years to come.”

Dr Mourik said he was “absolutely delighted” to receive the award, adding that after 32 years in rural practice he still enjoys the nature of the work and living the rural lifestyle.

“My interest in medicine came about when I was four, when my father drove me to Melbourne’s main railway station one day, put me on the train, and asked the other people in the carriage to ‘put him off at Colac’. After waiting on the platform for a little while, my uncle, Dr Andrew Newell—who was a country doctor—picked me up and I stayed with him, my aunty and cousins for three months...before being sent back to Melbourne to find out that my mother had had a baby girl while I was away!

“Well staying in Colac, I spend a lot of time with my uncle—including on his hospital rounds—and even though I was very young I’m sure these few months in my early childhood had a tremendous impact on my future career path. Since then, my uncle has continued to be a constant influence on my life.

“Once I finished Year 12, I had a year off because I was too young to go to university, so I worked as a jackaroo at Yackandandah, about 20 minutes from Wodonga. I loved the area so much that I decided very early on that the north-east of Victoria was where I wanted to live and work, and that’s exactly what I’ve been lucky enough to do.

“Rural practice makes for the most exciting and interesting career path—it allows you to do the procedural stuff and also lead a great lifestyle.

“The greatest thing is getting to know your patients and being a central part of your community. Every weekend I’m on-call I deliver the baby of a woman who I delivered 30 or so years before. I also love working as a member of a close-knit healthcare team, and that’s exactly what we’ve got in Albury-Wodonga—I have the privilege of working with world-class GPs, specialists and other health professionals right here in rural Victoria.

“If I was a Year 12 student now, knowing what I do, would I take up medicine and would I work in the country? The answer is ‘absolutely yes’. I’ve been privileged to have a wonderful career and I still enjoy what I do. We’ve got the opportunity to actually have a great lifestyle as well as a great career. The balance really is perfect.”

Westpac’s National Industry Leader, Health, Robert Ford, said Westpac was again proud to support RDAA and its award-winners in 2010.

“Westpac is delighted to support the recognition of dedicated individuals to improving rural and remote health and their outstanding achievements and commitment. As Australia’s oldest bank and first company we have seen over many years the importance of rural centres and how the essential services provided by rural doctors are an integral part of country communities. It is imperative that we work together to ensure continued investment in rural services which sustain healthy economies in regional and rural areas. Westpac looks forward to continuing to provide support to RDAA, its members and rural communities across Australia.”

Dr Nola Maxfield and Dr Pieter Mourik are available for interview.
A photo of Dr Mourik is also available.
Media contact: Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638 (Sunday only) or Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890.