



Media release
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Ballarat medical student and rural health advocate wins prestigious national award

A fourth year medical student from Ballarat in rural Victoria—who is studying medicine at the University of NSW—has been awarded this year’s Westpac RDAA Medical Student of the Year Award for her dedication to, and many achievements in, the rural health sector.

Francesca Garnett received the prestigious award at a gala dinner at *Rural Medicine Australia 2011*, the national conference of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) and Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM), held in Alice Springs on Saturday night.

RDAA President, Dr Paul Mara, said the awards selection committee was very impressed by Francesca’s dedication to promoting rural practice through her extensive involvement with her university’s rural health club, the Rural Allied Health and Medical Society (RAHMS), and the time and effort she has devoted to helping other students develop an appreciation for the rewards of rural practice.

“Francesca has been active in RAHMS since first starting university, and has held a position on the committee constantly since then,” Dr Mara said.

This year she helped organise its annual Rural Appreciation Weekend in Dunedoo NSW, which attracted more than 150 health students from around Australia.”

“She is also closely involved in the work and activities of the National Rural Health Students’ Network (NRHSN), which represents more than 9,000 medical, nursing and allied health students who belong to 29 university Rural Health Clubs. She is currently Co-Chair of the NRHSN and takes a leadership role in their conferences, events and political advocacy.

“There can be no question that Francesca is a highly deserving recipient of this award. She is a motivated, dedicated student who is working hard towards not only securing her own future as a rural practitioner, but making great inroads into encouraging and supporting other students to do the same,” Dr Mara said.

Francesca’s parents have a rural psychological practice in Ballarat, and she has always been dedicated to pursuing a career in rural health.

“I was always attracted to working in rural health, and I decided that it really was feasible for me to study medicine after I attended a weekend for rural students from Monash and Melbourne universities,” Francesca said.

“It really helped me to hear directly from students how they went about things like finding houses and managing their finances when they had to move so far from their homes in the country.

“The best thing I did when I arrived at university was joining the Rural Health Club. It is a great way to meet other students with similar interests and I now have a network of friends right across the country.

“These friends are not only my support at uni, but will also be my colleagues in the future. I know that no matter where I go, there will always be someone, which takes away any apprehension of going somewhere new. Being involved with my club and the National Rural Health Students’ Network has been my favourite part of university!” Francesca said.

“The support I have received through the Rural Medical Bonded Scholarship and the John Flynn Scholarship Scheme has been fantastic, letting me attend rural health conferences and events, and to be placed with a mentor in Quilpie in southwest Queensland where I saw the enormous benefits and challenges of remote practice. I’m also very excited to be moving to Wagga Wagga next year to finish my degree at the University of NSW Rural Clinical School.”

News of Francesca’s award was welcomed by Dr Kim Webber, CEO of Rural Health Workforce, which auspices and manages the National Rural Health Students Network.

“We’re delighted that one of our devoted student leaders has been recognised for the contribution she is making to the future of rural health,” Dr Webber said.

“Francesca is an inspiration not only to her peers but also to seasoned professionals who are heartened by her enthusiasm and common-sense. She leads by example, does the hard work behind the scenes and certainly gets the wider context of community health.

“Not only will she develop into a fine doctor, but she also has the makings of a terrific advocate for the people of rural and remote Australia.”

Westpac’s National Head of Healthcare, Craig Anderson, said Westpac was again proud to support RDAA and its award-winners in 2011.

“Westpac is delighted to support the recognition of dedicated individuals to improving rural and remote health and their outstanding achievements and commitment. Westpac has a long history of supporting communities and important works. We see the RDAA and the work of rural doctors and care givers as being as important as any we currently support. 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 Paul Mara and Francesca Garnett are available for interview.

A photo of Francesca is also available.

Media contact: Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638 (Sunday only) or Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890.