Victorian medical student receives prestigious national rural award

A medical student from Deakin University in Geelong has been recognised for her dedication to rural, remote and Indigenous health, receiving the Rural Doctors Association of Australia’s (RDAA) Medical Student of the Year Award for 2017.

Tara Grayson received the honour at the awards dinner for the Rural Medicine Australia 2017 conference, held in Melbourne on Friday night. The award is accompanied by a $2000 grant to put towards a rural health project.

Ms Grayson is completing her second year of a post-graduate medical degree at Deakin, having attained a Bachelor of Biomedicine from the University of Melbourne in 2015. Amongst a raft of other qualifications and achievements, she also completed a course in Wildlife Nursing and Management in 2015.

President of the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA), Dr Ewen McPhee, said Ms Grayson is an outstanding medical student who is already achieving much for rural, remote and Indigenous health.

"It is hard to imagine someone who has put more effort and energy into the cause of rural and remote health, all while still at medical school" he said.

"She is a passionate advocate for the health of rural and remote communities, and has completed a substantial number of placements in rural, remote and Indigenous communities, to both gain clinical experience in rural practice and also to make a real difference.

"She is an enthusiastic and passionate Teddy Bear Hospital (TBH) co-ordinator for Deakin University's rural health club, NOMAD. In that role, she has co-ordinated primary school visits that teach young children about healthy living and help make them feel more at ease in the hospital environment.

"Notably, she has introduced the program to rural towns in south-western Victoria, as she passionately believes that all students should receive the same opportunities regardless of where they live or what school they attend.

"Tara has also assisted with further enhancement of Deakin University’s Rural High School Visit program through visits to the Apollo Bay community, encouraging students there to consider health disciplines as a career.

"She has been a strongly committed participant in the John Flynn Placement program — through which medical students undertake placements in rural and remote areas — and was an active participant in the Deakin Doctors in Vietnam health study tour (which included a visit to a rural village in the Mekong Delta, and was run in January when students are typically on leave).

"This all shows Tara's strong dedication to rural health and her willingness to go above and beyond."

Ms Grayson said: "I have a strong interest in pursuing a career and advancing health outcomes in rural and remote communities after seeing first-hand the difference in healthcare available between rural and metropolitan areas.

"In primary school I visited Robinson River, a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory, and saw the difference in lifestyle, diet and health services available there. These differences were further highlighted during my visit to rural Indonesia in 2015 with the RV3 Rotavirus Vaccine team and again in 2016, in rural Vietnam, through the Deakin Doctors in Vietnam program, where I saw that small changes in a rural community can have real, tangible change on the lives of those who live there.

"Furthermore, through the John Flynn Placement program, I spent two weeks’ placement with a GP in Darwin in 2016 and will be spending three weeks on King Island later this year to further understand the differences in rural
health and advance the health of this rural community. In 2018-19 I will be placed in Warrnambool, a town in south-west Victoria, for clinical school.

"Through my Award, I intend to extend the reach of TBH and maximise new educational opportunities in rural Victorian communities, including a “Teddy Bear Hospital on the Road” program which will visit isolated Western Victorian towns. I would also like to develop a new network of TBHs that are specifically focused on rural and remote communities and becomes self-sustaining.

"The TBH program is particularly important for rural communities where hospital visits cause emotional stress, and often involves long-distance travel to reach necessary services.

"Coming originally from Melbourne, rural practice to me is incredibly rewarding as you are not simply a healthcare provider to a population but a member of the community. During my experiences as a medical student, I have often felt more involved and connected with rural communities than I ever experienced in my time in the city.

"The most challenging part of rural practice that I have seen during my placements has been the distribution of limited healthcare resources to communities that can be many hundreds of kilometres apart. This can result in significant travel for rural patients to get to the health services they need. This highlights the challenges of rural practice, yet all my placements to-date have had wonderful, enthusiastic health professionals who overcome these challenges to provide quality care to their patients.

"A particular highlight of my time as a medical student was in Darwin, where I was fortunate to meet an enthusiastic practice manager who volunteered his own time to cook meals for the local Indigenous long grasser population.

"During my placement, I helped him cook and distribute food and met many fascinating and lovely people who lived in outdoor areas in Darwin. The importance of what he did was not simply providing food to those who needed it — rather, he acted as a bridge between a vulnerable population and the health services that could assist them. He would encourage everyone he met, who knew him so well that they often referred to him as family, to visit his practice for free health services...and he would regularly help get them there and back.

"So often during my time at university I have been told that we as health professionals should help the broad population of vulnerable Australians, but I am so often left feeling helpless in the face of such large inequities. This experience highlighted to me that you do not have to tackle the whole problem on your own — even small acts for a small number of people can have real, tangible change on their lives.

"During my placement in Darwin, I met a young Indigenous girl who, at age 7, weighed only 17kg. She had such extreme tooth decay that she was unable to eat her daily meals. It was incredibly eye-opening and emotionally challenging when her mother, told by the GP that her daughter needed to see the dentist, said they could not afford the appointment fee. He told her that it was free, but she replied that she couldn’t even afford the bus fare to get there.

"This highlighted to me the multi-faceted struggles that many rural, remote and Indigenous Australians face as well as the health inequities that are experienced in these communities. It also showed me how important it is to try to get more health professionals directly into these communities.”

Outside of medicine, Tara is a keen cook and loves to relax by baking and trying new things in the kitchen. "My latest experiment has involved trying to make homemade cheese which makes me very excited for my upcoming placement at the end of the year on King Island!" she said. Tara also enjoys spending time at the beach and is an enthusiastic member of the agricultural show committee in the Victorian coastal community of Apollo Bay.

A high resolution photo of Tara Grayson is available by contacting Patrick Daley.

Available for interview:
Tara Grayson (via Patrick Daley)
Outgoing RDA President, Dr Ewen McPhee (via Patrick Daley and Ineke Kuiper)

Media contacts:
Patrick Daley on 0408 004 890
Ineke Kuiper on 0408 669 638