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Research Article

# Pharmacy students' rural career intentions: Perspectives on rural background and placements

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To describe the effect of rural placements and rural background on pharmacy students' intention to practice rurally.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional study invited 250 pharmacy students to participate in the mixed-methods survey. Pharmacy students were invited to participate at the National Australian Pharmacy Student Association (NAPSA) annual congress held in Bendigo, Victoria in January 2014. This study aimed to investigate the pharmacy students' intention to pursue a rural career.

**Results:** A total of 156 participants responded to the survey. Participants were mostly female (68%), and were aged under 30 years with the majority aged 20–24 years (116, 74%). A third of the respondents were (32%) identified with having a rural background, and about half of all the participants (53%) had undertaken a clinical placement. Students who came from a rural background were more likely to work in rural areas than urban after graduation ( $p < 0.001$ ). However, when both rural and urban background students undertook a rural placement there was no difference in their rural career intentions. Additionally, the majority of students (93%) considered rural placements as beneficial to their training. Standards of health care and social isolation features are major barriers to rural practice and facilitators included increased patient interaction and community engagement.

**Conclusion:** This study shows that rural exposure (rural background or rural placement) can positively affect students' intentions to participate in the rural workforce regardless of their background. Students have a desire to understand rural health and are likely to consider a rural career.

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**Keywords:** Pharmacy; Career; Rural; Pharmacy students

## Introduction

Health care accessibility and access to medicines in rural areas is limited by the continued rural pharmacist shortage.

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This is partly due to the maldistribution of the pharmacy workforce in both rural and urban areas. Other health disciplines, such as medicine and nursing, have demonstrated that students are more likely to work in rural areas after graduation if they have experience in the rural environment prior to graduation, either through background or student placements.<sup>1–3</sup>

According to the 2012 Health Workforce Australia Report, there is a maldistribution of its 22,676 pharmacists, with the workforce concentrated in the urban (76%) and inner regional

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(12.5%) locations as per the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGS) Remoteness Structure.<sup>3</sup> In urban settings, there were 101 pharmacists per 100,000 people, compared to 79–40 pharmacists per 100,000 people in rural and remote areas, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests a potential oversupply of pharmacists. However, the current workforce maldistribution means the rural and remote pharmacist under-supply persists.<sup>4,5</sup>

The main two pathways to entry qualification to practice pharmacy in Australia are either an eight-semester bachelor degree taught over four years or a graduate-entry master of pharmacy taught in six semesters over two years.<sup>6</sup> These courses vary in content, length and objectives among the 18 schools of pharmacy in Australia. A key element of this education is the clinical pharmacy placements.<sup>6</sup> Placements provide students with experiential learning and the opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge to practice. While placements are traditionally in the hospital or community pharmacy setting, they can vary in content, length, and objectives among the various universities.<sup>7</sup>

Pharmacy students undertake experiential learning placements from early in the pharmacy degree. This experiential learning helps students to form a professional identity and to contextualize their learning.<sup>6,8</sup> Moreover, a recent published study has found that a structured rural pharmacy program is important in influencing students' perceptions and interest in a career in rural areas. Key components identified by the students included: social awareness, recognizing job opportunities, and interprofessional learning. Most students surveyed (78%) indicated their intentions to work in rural areas following their placement.<sup>5</sup>

Rural clinical placements provide rural experiences to students and are often their first exposure to rural life. Early career pharmacists working in the rural workforce were likely to have prior experience of rural areas such as a rural childhood or internship in a rural area.<sup>8–10</sup> Several rural clinical programs have been initiated by governments to increase the likelihood of students moving to rural areas after their graduation. Examples of these programs include interprofessional rural placements and targeted experiential interventions. These approaches result in influencing perceptions of rural practice in a positive direction among urban-origin students by raising awareness and challenging their preconceptions of rural pharmacy practice.<sup>8,9,11</sup>

This research aimed to investigate the pharmacy students' intention to pursue a rural career. This study explored the relationship between their intention to work rurally and their rural exposure in the form of rural placement or rural background. This study also included a short answer response to questions about enablers and barriers for rurality as a career choice.

## Methods

This cross-sectional study used a mixed-method approach to survey pharmacy students at the National

Australian Pharmacy Student Association (NAPSA) annual congress held in Bendigo, Victoria in January 2014. NAPSA, whose membership is approximately 3500, is the peak pharmacy student body in Australia.<sup>12</sup> There was no registration fee associated with the congress for attending students. Consent was implied by their voluntary participation in the survey. A list of the interview questions are included in the [Figure](#).

## Ethics approval

Ethics for this study has been approved by the University of Tasmania's Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (reference H0013761).

## Participants and recruitment

Attendance at this congress is open to all Australian pharmacy students and interns. Students undertaking an Australian undergraduate bachelor of pharmacy or graduate-entry master of pharmacy approved by the Australian Pharmacy Council as an entry-level qualification to the pharmacy profession were eligible to participate if they attended the NAPSA Congress 2014 held in Bendigo, Victoria in January 2014. Students were excluded if they did not consent to participate. Attending pharmacy students were invited to participate in a voluntary survey about their clinical placements and their future career intentions. The intention was to survey all pharmacy students present at the congress. This paper-based survey was administered by three academic pharmacists during the morning session of a single day at the congress.

## Survey information

The survey was constructed and administered by the researchers and piloted the previous year at the NAPSA Congress 2013 in Hobart, Tasmania. This pilot study was used to improve the survey, and it was then sent to academics at University Departments of Rural Health to assess face validity. The survey consisted of seven main questions relating to pharmacy clinical placements and their career intentions after graduation.<sup>4,5</sup> A 5-point Likert scale was used to investigate their opinions on the benefits of rural placements and their relationship to rural practice. Likert scales were combined into indexes to add value and decrease variability to the data.<sup>13</sup> Two short answer questions asked the participant to give written feedback about their intentions and attitude working in a rural environment. Additionally, students were asked to provide demographic details about themselves.

## Data analysis

This data were imported into SPSS 22 and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the chi-squared test to determine if there was a significant association between the students' participation in a placement or rural background and their

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