

The Medical Journal of Australia • MJA

MEDIA RELEASE

HEALTH RESEARCHERS NEED TO LIVE AND WORK IN RURAL COMMUNITIES THEY STUDY

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RURAL health researchers should live with, work with and report back to the participants in their studies, rather than flying in, collecting data, and disappearing, according to the National Rural Health Commissioner Professor Ruth Stewart.

Writing in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, Professor Stewart said people referred to researchers who fly in, rapidly collect data and fly off with it, “leaving only guano behind”, as “seagulls”.

“I have seen many examples of innovative models of care in rural Australia,” Professor Stewart wrote.

“I have seen health services, training providers, health professionals and communities co-designing solutions that work for them, making a difference to the lives of rural people.

“To improve rural health we need to better understand it. We need to understand the why of health outcomes and evaluate which interventions are acceptable and effective. Evidence to inform such answers is scarce. Gaps in the Australian rural health research evidence base threaten to leave holes in Australian health policy.

“Ongoing engagement with rural communities that deepen understandings of local context and experience enrich research outcomes.

“Researchers who live and work in community can respond to local clinical questions and provide feedback to community on their findings.”

Professor Stewart advocated for research networks, such as the Spinifex Network, which comprises such community-based researchers.

“Within this network, researchers are able to find collegiate support and collaboration and conduct research that will lead to improved rural and remote health outcomes. Australians living outside urban centres will benefit from such community-based research.”

The Spinifex Network will publish an open access supplement in the *Medical Journal of Australia* on 14 December.

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