RRIG Convenor’s Report

As the year draws to a close, it is amazing to reflect on the developments that have taken place in 2004 for our group. We are gradually increasing our membership and gaining a deepened understanding of the membership and its expectations of us. This has come about from the willing commitment of the RRIG Committee and all have given greatly of their own time to ensure that the tasks undertaken are fully addressed. And so I thank them very, very much on your behalf.

APS National Conference

The APS Conference in Sydney was a very well presented conference and our early morning forum created another opportunity for presentation of professional issues, our AGM and also face-to-face dialogue. Four papers were presented and are now scheduled for our website. We would like to present another forum in 2005 in Melbourne so please consider this opportunity.

Psychology Week- “Celebrate Rural Resilience”

As part of our plans to promote rural psychology we organised for pens to be especially inscribed and forwarded with the Psychology Week material from the APS office. The message from us on the pens was 'Celebrate Rural Resilience'. We also gave out pens at the conference.

We know that some members gave free talks during the week, and would like to hear of members’ ventures in promoting Psychology Week. We would also like to develop ideas for next year and would welcome your suggestions.

Plans for 2005

As a result of some interesting survey and pilot work being undertaken by the RRIG committee we now have contact with a number of groups of psychologists around the nation. These groups will pilot targeted activities which we will study to inform further offerings to all members. Much inspiration and energy has been given to this by Robyn Bradbury, and we are most grateful to her for her generosity to rural psychology in practice.

Robyn presented an excellent paper at the recent APS conference outlining some of her perceptions in relation to rural psychology practice and an edited version of this paper has been reproduced below. It is also available on our website www.psychology.org.au/units/interest_groups/rural/

Webcasting

A new working party has been formed to progress remote PD, supervision and mentoring opportunities. The APS Directorate has approved the services of a specialised provider to assist in this task. We hope that it will not be too long until we are truly connected through this amazing, economically viable, face-to-face service. We also hope that important trials can be conducted with our members, and we'll keep you informed of progress.

Rural Health Conference

Conference Alice Springs The 8th National Rural Health Conference will be held in Alice Springs from 10th-13th March 2005. Details www.ruralhealth.org.au
We would like to enhance the representation of psychologists at this important conference so please see if you can attend. One source of funding support is through the Victorian Healthcare Association, which supplies Victorians with funding support for PD. Log on to www.vha.org.au If you know of other possibilities from other States we'd happily publish them if you could forward them to us.

Interesting contacts continue to arrive through email, with a wide range of concerns, and questions. This is great as we can all benefit from the dialogue, shared expertise and professional contact. Would it be helpful to publish a new section with member’s requests?

With very best wishes to all members at this special season of Christmas and New Year.

Ailsa Drent
Convenor, RRIG

The Needs of Psychologists in Rural and Remote Areas

Background

This presentation was made on my own initiative on behalf of the interest group in Rural and Remote Psychology. I am a Clinical Psychologist, Neuropsychologist, Psychotherapist and Audiologist. I have been practising as a psychologist since 1968. I completed my training in Melbourne at the University of Melbourne, the Royal Children’s Hospital, Queensland University, the Alfred, the Royal Melbourne and the Austin Hospitals. I have taught at Melbourne, Monash and Swinburne Universities.

My work and training were metropolitan based until I went to Papua New Guinea in 1971 and I have worked there intermittently on Aid Programs until 1999. My last project was with the management and treatment of PTSD in children and adolescents in Bougainville following the Civil War there which lasted 20 years and ended in 1999-2000. I have been a Consultant for the Royal Children’s Hospital establishing services in Mildura in the 1980s and 1990s developing different models of service delivery. I have been a consultant to North West Kimberley Mental Health Service establishing mental health services there.

I am currently a Consultant Psychologist to Western Samoa and visit there regularly to do psychological assessments. There are no psychologists or psychological tests in that country. This is voluntary work. There has been an increasing diversity in my practice, which has a metropolitan base. This has involved the development of dialogue about the needs of psychologists in rural and remote areas and also of specific client populations who need information and training on psychological testing and interpretation.

As a former Chairperson of the now Directorate of Professional Affairs, I have felt a responsibility to represent what I think are now very serious professional issues which have become divisive within our professional body and which have the capacity for the profession and the public to lose faith in the professional practice of psychology.

These issues I have identified as:
1. Psychological testing, training, application, and accreditation, the availability of psychological tests to psychologists and to the public.
2. The needs of psychologists in rural and remote areas.
3. Support of professional psychologists in rural and remote areas and the availability of specific data from them regarding their views on issues pertinent to them as professionals, their personal needs and ongoing support and their particular geographic requirements.

I set about undertaking my own needs assessment for rural and remote psychologists after the APS Conference last year when I came up with the idea of re-establishing the test library, which ACER formerly ran and abandoned because it was too costly. I discovered a minefield of false paths and the test library has advanced no further, although I see a way through that problem.

My needs assessment was based on my own experience in rural and remote areas that led me to believe that there were latent issues unaddressed
in the Society. As a Fellow I thought it fit to tease out these issues and since I travel widely in rural and remote areas, it was a propitious time to seek out my colleagues in some of those areas and discuss with them personally their views with respect to their needs and especially with respect to tests and testing of the test library. As you know RRIG ran a survey on test usage which will be discussed later.

My travels in this period took me to the following locations, which I have systematically surveyed:
1. Broome; North-west WA
2. Mildura; Regional Victoria Branch
3. Mackay Central; Central Queensland Coast Branch
4. Gladstone, Central Queensland: 1 hour from the Rockhampton Branch
5. Western Samoa

The comments made are from interviewing local psychologists and also my observations based on my knowledge of the client needs in these areas. My work there means I meet a broad cross section of the population as a lay person. (I am a collector of marine specimens for universities.)

These comments are thus made on the basis of:
1. Psychologist information
2. Client information
4. My work in the field in developing countries in the Pacific Region to which I think a more thoughtful understanding could be extended by our profession.

On the screen behind you, you will be seeing as I am speaking a film of underwater wrecks taken on the Central Queensland coast. The marine environment represent to most of us, a foreign and alien world, remote to our experience. This is what life is like in rural and remote areas. The wrecks represent human disaster, loss, grief, tragedy, suffering and heroism. This is the stuff of our daily lives as psychologists anywhere.

Under the water you will observe each wreck is different – some are covered in new spectacular growths, coral that is alive and vital with a myriad of flashing fish. Other wrecks are skeletal, bare on the sand with no new life. This I believe is a metaphor for the purpose of psychology – to create new growth and to prevent desiccation. The work of psychology, well practised, is to create transformation and new foundations for living.

The wrecks of this film are there not only to act as a peaceful reminder of the concepts of what our work encapsulates, but also as a metaphor of the remoteness and tragedy of the people with whom we work and also the fundamental issues about our profession being accountable for assisting clients through humour, helping them to develop new internal structures. In essence, we need to seriously consider that in remote areas there are risks and I want to go on now to further refine my ideas using the RISK model in rural and remote areas.

The Concept of RISK (Resources, Integrity, Structure, Knowledge)

Resources

Any conceptualisation of the issues involved in rural and remote psychology starts off being based on defining needs for psychological assessment tools and this was substantiated by our survey which confirmed there was such a need.

So there is a need for resources. However, my personal contact indicated that psychologists felt that they needed mentoring, that they were professionally junior and that there were no senior colleagues to draw on with whom to discuss serious matters. They felt their privacy compromised, they felt their status was inferior to metropolitan psychologists and they felt alienated by the PD program because it is geographically and financially inaccessible. Mostly they appreciated some personal contact with a senior member of the Society whose travel and initiatives are largely self-funded.

These young, mostly female people go into rural and remote areas after a fourth year degree course with little or no training in practical skills or issues to do with rural and remote psychology, as it is not the aim of undergraduate courses to teach these matters. There is little access to skilled
supervision and immediate superiors are at a junior level in the profession themselves. High workload and poor pay arise frequently and can lead to burnout. With no way of dealing with this often these people remain committed to the geographical area with marriage and family commitments and they leave designated psychology positions to either leave the workforce or to take up generic positions in management. This can lead to the loss of designated psychology positions.

A further issue is that the cost of psychological tests and the absence of training by skilled practitioners means that little or no psychological assessment is undertaken in rural and remote areas. The public lose out very badly here – areas such as Dingo, for example, in Central Queensland, has the highest suicide rate in the state and there are no psychologists there. Death by shooting is not uncommon and the Mackay Branch say Dingo is vastly under-serviced.

Psychologists in Gladstone are part of the Rockhampton Branch, one hour away – too far to travel for Branch meetings for PD sessions. They have no senior staff with whom to discuss professional issues. They want locally available PD especially on tests and testing interpretation.

Part of the resourcing plan is to address the test library seriously and a pilot project is being developed to establish test cooperatives on a local basis in Mildura and Mackay, and possibly Broome and Western Samoa using my personal test library of approximately 200 tests. This will be tracked in the next year.

In addition we intend to pilot a program of PD personally delivered, contextualising test use of interpretation in the following areas:
1. Essentials of treatment planning
2. Intellectual assessment of infants, children and adults
3. Pain management
4. Career development and recruitment and selection
5. Neuropsychological assessment of children and adults

These PD sessions will be made available as required and funded partly by the Branch and RRIG if possible.

Hopefully, these programs will generate generalist PD points and make some sense of the tests currently required for registration while actually having a useful function professionally.

Psychologists in Rural and Remote areas lack resources.

Integrity

The second part of the RISK model is integrity. Our profession depends on its public reputation to be useful and to function for the public. We have to be seen as a profession which has integrity. In rural and remote areas there are serious issues for individuals who practise in that geographical area.

The most horrific event has been the murder of one of our respected colleagues in N.W. Australia – the professional body did not respond in any way to what is arguably a questionable political matter. I would like to dedicate this paper to Ron Downie who did have the courage and integrity to stand up for professional issues. Personal exposure is a huge issue for rural and remote psychologists and there is nowhere to escape in remote positions. It takes courage to function as a psychologist on a day to day basis where there is limited privacy and patient confidentiality is an issue. We do not accord sufficient respect to these psychologists.

Psychologists in rural and remote areas are exposed personally and professionally and need support to maintain integrity in the face of significantly greater pressure than is experienced by their colleagues in metropolitan areas.

Structure

The third aspect of the RISK model is structure.

Our society has Division Branches, Colleges, Interest Groups and a State/Regional Base. It is complex and I certainly believe Garry Khoo when he says that the society attempts to include all members in the structure. However, this is not the case in remote areas such as Western Australia and Queensland where there are very isolated individual psychologists who are unable to travel to local branches.

One solution to this is to provide a mentoring program for psychologists disadvantaged by distance. This would, I might say, also address the needs of those psychologists who work in aid programs and who are a very high risk, and also psychologists who work in the Pacific Region. As I have said I am the only psychologist regularly visiting Western Samoa and am training a
psychiatric nurse to undertake routine testing because otherwise none will be done.

I believe we in Australia metropolitan areas are incredibly privileged and fail to realise large regional disadvantages, not just in rural and remote areas, but in the Pacific region and islands.

Psychologists in rural and remote areas fall through the cracks in the structure of the Australian Psychological Society. One way of addressing this is to establish a mentoring program using senior members of the Society, such as currently practising Fellows, to mentor psychologists in rural and remote areas.

Knowledge

Lastly in the RISK model, there is knowledge, which in our context must be considered contentious because an undergraduate course at present does not fit graduates to work in rural and remote areas and that is where they go because there are no positions in metropolitan areas. They accept low rates of pay, poor or absent supervision, isolation from family and friends, little professional support and it is no wonder they leave, or worse, become seriously depressed.

We need to rethink the training for psychologists who choose to work in this sector. It may be at the post graduate level, such as has been introduced in NSW but this is a clinical/medical model and I am unsure whether this is entirely appropriate for all aspects of the rural and remote sector. I am also not sure if there is funding for this through State governments. This is arguably a Federal matter but State governments run health budgets that are very small.

Psychologists in rural and remote areas are simply not equipped with the requisite knowledge to undertake the work required in rural and remote areas. They are new graduates whose exposure to professional practice is nil and it would be irresponsible to think that the undergraduate courses are sufficient to enable these people to work in the city, let alone in the geographical areas we are discussing. I plan to develop a curricula of basic skills and texts to resource the groups I am working with in the next 12 months. This will, I believe, form the basis for what a course for practitioners in rural and remote areas would need to know to work in isolation.

A psychologist practising in rural and remote areas is at risk in many ways. We need to give support and thought to the 25% of our colleagues supporting 37% of the population in Australia.

The RISK model gives us structure to address the problems facing our profession and assist in the professional development of psychologists who are isolated and inexperienced.

The metaphor with shipwrecks is clear here because I think this situation is potentially catastrophic to our profession. We are going to become irrelevant unless we are proactive in articulating the matters pertinent to our own profession before some government body takes it over. We need to consider issues such as the availability of psychometric tests and training to make them professional relevant. We need to consider making them available through test cooperatives or libraries. We need a mentoring program, maybe staffed by Fellows experience in the field and we need to reconsider the models of training psychologists.

These are serious challenges and the Society must deal with them for the profession of psychology to survive in rural and remote areas and for the sake of those psychologists.

Robyn Bradbury, Fellow, Australian Psychological Society

Paper presented at the APS National Conference October 2004
Many members will be familiar with RAPLink, the Regional Action Partnership Link. However, for those who don’t know about this organisation RAPlink was established to link communities and resources. It is supported by the National Farmers’ Federation, the Emeritus Faculty of the Australian National University and the Canberra City Lions Club. It is a voluntary organisation, but services offered by resource providers can attract charges.


For your interest the December issue of the RAPLink newsletter contains the following news items:
1.  RuStiC community survey is under way
2.  We visit Darwin and the Northern Territory ACC
3.  RAPlink dinner 14 December -- deadline for bookings 8 December
4.  Report on Networking On-line Conference
5.  Mary Porter leaves Volunteering ACT for ACT Legislative Assembly
6.  BushVision moving ahead with community projects
7.  IMB Community Foundation funding projects in 2005
8.  Season's Greetings
9.  RAPlink Administration

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