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Action steps for improving rural children's health

A pre-conference workshop at the Caring for Country Kids Conference in Alice Springs yesterday highlighted the real challenges Australia has in improving the health and wellbeing of children in rural and remote areas in Australia.

Pat Anderson, Chair of the Lowitja Institute, observed how exasperating it is to realise that things are no better now than ten years ago. Pat agreed with other speakers in the workshop that it is clear that the present approaches are not working.

"We can't afford to spend critical time whenever there is a change in government to go back and reinvent the wheel," she said. "We have to do better."

Others to address the workshop were Megan Mitchell, National Children's Commissioner, and Kerry Arabena, Director, Indigenous Health Equity, Melbourne University. Despite the serious situation, those at the workshop agreed that there are action steps that can be taken to improve rural kids' health nationally.

Chantal Ober, 2015 NT Young Australian of the Year, spoke eloquently about the capacity of young people 12 years and older to contribute to the development of programs and services to meet their communities' needs.

"Young people know what's required and all they really need is the community's support to have their views acted on," Chantal said.

Megan Mitchell acknowledged that isolated and rural children are especially vulnerable and referred to data showing that self-harm, suicide and family violence are having a devastating impact. She spoke about a national framework which would be devoted to the unique needs of children and which would provide an institutional structure for the local action proposed by Chantal.

Based on these contributions to the workshop and those of Rhiannon Cook from the NSW Council of Social Service; Tim Moore, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Child Protection Studies; and Jo McCubbin, regional paediatrician in Gippsland, Victoria; the workshop agreed on specific models for rural and remote service delivery which will be considered by delegates to the Conference.

"What we've done so far is not working," Pat Anderson said. "Governments must listen to these plans which come from experts in rural and remote health and wellbeing, education and other sectors," Pat said.

The period leading up to the Federal Election provides significant opportunity for political parties and governments to focus on these critical issues.

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Conference website: www.countrykids.org.au