



# Evidence-based practice for improving the wellbeing of rural GPs

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## Objectives

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the impact of Rural Retreats, an initiative of the Rural Doctors Workforce Agency of South Australia. The retreats aim to provide rural GPs with the chance to examine their goals and priorities, and to make positive changes in their lives. Previous research by RDWA has shown that increasing the psychological wellbeing of GPs can be an effective strategy for improving their intentions to stay in rural practice!

## Methods

Evaluation forms were completed at the end of each retreat, assessing GPs' reactions to the course and the immediate benefits they received. Follow-up surveys were administered six to twelve weeks after attending, and again one to four years later. These surveys assessed changes they had made in their lives as a result of the retreat both in the short-term and the long-term.

## About the Retreats

The Rural Retreats are an opportunity for rural GPs to examine their goals and priorities and to make positive changes in their lives and includes the following:

### Introduction and Discovering your priorities

- What has been significant in your life?
- What motivates you?
- How did you get where you are today?

### Identifying stressors and what can be changed

- What is the balance in your life like?
- Where is stress coming from and what effect is it having?
- Identifying what you can change: setting a goal
- Making sure it is achievable

### Moving forward: What are your options?

- Using the group to identify options
- Which ones are most likely to work?
- The real world: Why might they not work?

### Moving forward: How do you change?

- What are the obstacles?
- How do you overcome them?
- Internal obstacles are the biggest – an evidence-based approach!
- Cognitive behavioural coaching

### Development of personal action plan and Close

- More on overcoming obstacles
- Setting up a plan that can work
- Scheduling of follow-up action plan
- Discussion about weekend and evaluation
- Close

A summary of results from the course evaluation (n=50) is shown in the below table. All items were rated on a 5-pt scale. Overall the participants found the course to be very beneficial.

Item	Mean
The course has helped me to establish a support network	4.24
After attending I am aware of the decisions to be made for positive changes in my life	4.41
As a result of the course I have acquired helpful strategies to assist with changes in my life	4.30
The course has helped me to create a set of achievable goals and strategies to implement	4.23

## Principal findings

### 6 to 12 week follow-up

At the follow-up (n=42), the majority of GPs were able to report significant and lasting changes they had made in their lives as a result of attending the retreat.

Item	% "yes"
Do you feel the retreat has changed the way you now view things in your personal and professional life?	88%
Have you been able to put any strategies into action since the weekend?	90%
Will you be able to continue doing this in the future as a result of what you learnt on the weekend?	100%

Comments made about the retreats include:

*My anxiety has reduced. I am coping better and look forward to work.*

*I'm less stressed about patients and others expectations and more focussed on what's important to maintain my own sanity.*

*I personally feel that this retreat really helps me in both my work and personal life. I return feeling uplifted and ready to put into action some of the practical ideas.*

*The course helped me to realise the subtle things that add up and bring unnecessary stress in my life.*

*Gave me time to get to the surface and gulp some clean air.*

### 1 to 4 year follow-up

The majority of GPs made significant improvements in their wellbeing over the longer term.

In the last month I have felt...	Before (n=69)	After (n=35)	Sig.
Professionally isolated	2.79	2.17	p=.040
No one for support	3.24	2.49	p=.015
In crisis with no help	2.58	1.86	p=.018

Comments made:

*I have never really wanted to do anything else apart from rural GP and probably will always continue to be a rural GP but now feel less overwhelmed with it all and will probably stay in my current situation for longer than I may have done so otherwise.*

*I feel I am coping better and happier in my setting. My family is happier too and this means that my stay in [rural general practice] will be prolonged.*

*Likely to be here longer.*

## Discussion

The RDWA Rural Retreats were perceived as very beneficial by an overwhelming majority of attendees, and, as a result, those GPs were able to effect positive and enduring changes in their personal and professional lives. Most significantly, by far the majority of participants feel that they now viewed things differently and that they would be able to use strategies learned in the retreat back in their working life. Most significantly, gains made at 6 to 12 weeks have been maintained in the longer-term, leading to greater sustainability of rural GPs.

## Implications

Programs such as this have the potential to significantly improve the psychological wellbeing of rural general practitioners. Based on the participants' own comments and previous research from RDWA among others, the indication is that this will lead to greater sustainability of rural GPs.

## References

1. Gardiner, M., Sexton, R., Durbridge, M., & Garrard, K. (2005). The role of psychological well-being in retaining rural general practitioners. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 13, 149-155.