

Going bush

“Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.” Albert Einstein

“Small steps by many equate to large strides collectively.” Dr John Kramer

Some musings from a first timer, written while it’s fresh in my mind 😊

Assumption 1: If you’ve found this document, you are interested in being a part of the medical workforce solution for the bush aka regional, rural, and remote Australia.

Assumption 2: You know that I know that there is no “one size fits all” model. These are just some thoughts and suggestions – if they seem useful, use them, if not, move on.

Assumption 3: Please know that I am not an expert. I am not pretending to be one. You should always “do your own research” and check with appropriate government departments and NGOs.

Step 1:

Decide what it is you can offer. Where are you thinking you could work? What hours/week are you able/wanting to work? How many weeks a year are you wanting to work? How many weeks/months/years are you wanting to work for? Would you relocate? Fly in fly out? Drive in drive out? Provide services via telehealth only or a mix of telehealth and face to face services? Do a one-off locum? “Adopt” a town/practice and provide ongoing care over the years?

None of us can give what we do not have. If you are already fully committed (or over committed), what will you put down in order to take this up? If you say yes to this, what will you say no to? This may not be the right time for you, or it could be the best adventure of your entire life! My experience of life is that we most regret the things we didn’t do.

Ships in the harbour are safe, but that’s not what ships were built for....

Step 2:

Choose an area or areas you would like to work in. Do you like open country, beaches, farming regions, mountains, deserts, forests, or all of the above? Would you tolerate hot, humid, cold, dry climates? How do you feel about flooding rains or bushfires?

If you choose somewhere interstate, know that there are different referral processes for public services and different rules for prescribing. Are you ok with that? Do you have provider number restrictions? There are opportunities to provide support in communities within an hour or so of capital cities, where there just aren’t enough GPs for the population. Going bush does not mean going remote. Unless you wish to.

Your preferences (or those of your partner/family) will narrow down the list of appropriate places or seasons you would choose.

Step 3:

Do some research. How important is a good coffee shop? Good restaurants? A gym? Swimming pool? Do you have cultural or religious requirements? Medical needs? Something for the kids, your partner, or parents to do while you are working? Do you want to climb a mountain? Surf every day? Visit a world-class winery? Art gallery? Dinosaur museum? Star gaze? Touch the red earth? Sample the freshest food you'll ever eat? Pan for gold? Dig for opals? Visit tourist areas? Mining towns? The farming communities? Check out the stock in the saleyard of the local tractor dealership? Watch the crops being harvested? Visit botanical gardens? Festivals – music, food, flowers? Compete in a marathon? Triathlon? That will narrow the list down further.

Step 4:

Do you want to work in a hospital or in a general practice or both? What is your skill set? All rural communities need and value GPs who are general GPs – most communities need more generalists than GPs with procedural skills or advanced specialised training (AST). Do you have GPwSI (GP with specific interest) skills e.g. sexual health, mental health, women's health, skin cancer, veterans' health, ASD/ADHD. Can you help upskill the regular workforce by educating or providing support for the local team? An AST is NOT a pre-requisite to add value to a town.

However, would you want/need to do additional training for the position that most interests you? Could you be funded to do this, or do you have to self-fund any updates?

Your list should be getting quite small by now.

Step 5:

Look into the work options. Read the websites. Filter out the marketing and try to get a sense of the culture of the place. A smart logo, flashy slogans, impressive goals, and a great vision statement are not enough. Are they lived or, once printed, are they promptly forgotten or ignored? A simple website or no website at all shouldn't exclude a practice either. Ask around. What is your sense of their workplace? Their culture? Does what you read or hear make you want to work there? Do you know anyone there? Would you be prepared to try it out and see for yourself?

Step 6:

Make contact and see if there is interest in and/or capacity to support you to do the work you have decided you want to do, where you want to do it. Talk to the people on the rural stands at conferences. Join ACRRM, the RACGP Rural Faculty and/or your RDAA state branch. Talk to people. Make contact online e.g. via closed Facebook or other pages. I

asked around, but the first suggestion fell through. In the end I followed up on a casual conversation at WONCA 2023 with people that I knew of rather than actually knew. There is no “right way” to do this.

If you go through a locum agency, they can filter out some of the above for you, but it will cost the owners lots of money and may or may not work. Do what you feel comfortable doing. Talk to friends, colleagues, check out the companion document with Government (does your state have a rural workforce agency?), RACGP, ACCRM and RDAA contacts. Your state RDA will have contacts and ideas, consider using these.

Step 7:

What’s on offer? What gap/s can you fill? Are you ready to commit yourself to a practice or a location or do you want to have a trial? Is it a contractor position where you can set your hours and appointment style or an employee model? What suits *you*? Is that on offer? If not, what is the compromise?

Step 8:

If the fit seems right, then it’s due diligence on both sides. There will be provider numbers to organise, banking details to list, logins, passwords, contracts etc to negotiate, work set ups to trial. This will take time and there may be errors or glitches. Please move forward with patience and good will - this makes for a smoother process and better outcomes, in my experience.

Step 9:

Give it a go but pace yourself appropriately. Personally, I’d rather start slow and finish strong. I’ve lived long enough to know that life is a marathon and if I go at a sprint pace, I simply won’t last the distance. You, however, may live life in short, sharp bursts of activity!

If it doesn’t work the first time around, review the process and see if you can workshop a solution. If not, that’s ok. It doesn’t mean it wasn’t worth trying or that what you are looking for is not available (although that may be the case) it may simply mean that you have to look elsewhere or reset your expectations.

Step 10:

Share your experiences. Good and bad. Be kind and recognise that it takes time to integrate into a team and if it doesn’t work there can be a mix of reasons. Don’t defame anyone and don’t breach confidentiality! Help us to find solutions. Create new pathways. Fill out the feedback questionnaire, give honest feedback if there is an exit interview.

Don’t let what you can’t do stop you doing what you can.

The something it is will be better than the nothing it’s replacing.