



Media Statement

MEDIA RELEASE

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More Than a Bed: Wheatbelt Family Giving Medical Students a Taste of Rural Life

Merredin farmers Mal and Rochelle Willis are no strangers to opening their home to new arrivals.

Since 2014, the couple has welcomed more than 20 medical students to their farm as part of the Wheatbelt Medical Student Immersion Program (WMSIP), offering them not just a place to stay, but a firsthand experience of life in rural Western Australia.

This year, they will once again host two first-year medical students from the University of Notre Dame Australia – and they can't wait.

"We've hosted students from overseas as well as those closer to home, and for many, it's their first time on a farm," Rochelle said.

"We expose them to what life on the land looks like. We do a farm safety tour, which opens their eyes to the risks and realities of working in paddocks and around machinery.

"But then we bring them out again at night to look up at the stars and experience the quiet and serenity of rural living."

Over the next few days (10–13 March), 210 medical students will disperse across 14 Wheatbelt towns to take part in WMSIP.

The program sees first-year students from the University of Notre Dame Australia and second-year students from Curtin University spend time in rural communities, visiting local hospitals and GP practices while taking part in cultural engagement and community activities such as Men's Shed visits.

The aim is simple: to give future doctors a genuine understanding of rural life and the realities of delivering healthcare outside major cities.

For Mal, a former Deputy President of the Shire of Merredin, hosting students was an opportunity to contribute to something bigger.

"It's a chance to show students what life here is really like," Rochelle said.

"They get to meet people in the community and see the role our GPs play, not just as healthcare providers but as active members of our town."

By the end of their stay, Rochelle says many students admit the experience has changed how they think about rural practice.

“Quite a few tell us they had never considered working in a rural town before visiting,” she said.

“It gives them a much greater appreciation for country life and the challenges rural people face.

“The farm visit also exposes them to real-world scenarios – the hazards of working with machinery or in sheds - which helps them apply what they’re learning in a practical rural setting.”

While the program provides invaluable insight for students, Rochelle says the hosts gain just as much in return.

“We share part of our world with them, which we hope will help them in their future,” she said.

“But we also build relationships and learn about their lives.

“We’re fortunate to still keep in touch with many of the students we’ve hosted, and we always tell them they’re welcome to return to the farm with their families.”

For some students, the impact of the immersion experience can shape an entire career.

Dr Jonathan Ackinclose describes himself as a “poster child” for the program.

As a medical student in 2012, he travelled to Kellerberrin as part of WMSIP. Today, he works in both the Wheatbelt and the Kimberley as Senior Medical Practitioner at Narrogin Health Service and District Medical Officer at Broome Health Service.

“Participating in WMSIP opened my eyes to rural life,” Dr Ackinclose said.

“It made me realise there’s another kind of town, another population and another way of doing things.”

One memory from that trip has stayed with him.

“On the day we arrived, the highway was closed so the delivery truck couldn’t get through, which meant there was no milk in the supermarket,” he said.

“The sign on the freezer door said ‘no milk until Wednesday’. I thought it was fantastic because there were cows everywhere.

“It really summed up the stoic rural attitude of just making do.”

Dr Ackinclose says working in rural areas offers a different kind of medical career.

“Compared to the city, the work is more varied and the teams are smaller,” he said.

“The community is genuinely pleased to have a doctor who’s committed to being there.”

The 2026 Wheatbelt Medical Student Immersion Program will see students visit towns including Brookton, Bruce Rock, Kellerberrin, Merredin, Moora, Narrogin, Southern Cross and Wongan Hills.

Programs like WMSIP play an important role in addressing the maldistribution of doctors in rural Western Australia.

Many medical students come from metropolitan backgrounds and may have little understanding of the challenges faced by inland communities when accessing healthcare.

Research consistently shows that early exposure to rural medicine increases the likelihood that doctors will consider rural practice.

Even for those who ultimately choose to work in cities, the experience helps build understanding of the barriers rural patients face when accessing care.

As Rochelle finalises preparations ahead of this year's student arrivals, she reflects on more than a decade of hosting.

There is just one downside.

"The only complaint we have about billeting students," she said with a smile, "is that their stays are too short."

The Wheatbelt Medical Student Immersion Program is a collaboration between the University of Notre Dame Australia, Curtin University, Rural Health West, WA Primary Health Alliance and the Wheatbelt East Regional Organisation of Councils (WE-ROC).

Ends

****Photos available***

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Rural Health West aims to improve access to quality healthcare for rural communities through the provision of a highly skilled, motivated and sustainable medical and allied health workforce. We are a not-for-profit organisation primarily funded through the WA Country Health Service and the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.