

# Editorial

## The challenge continues for rural GPs

*Tessa Turnbull, editor and Katikati GP*

---

I heard some comments at our peer group meeting this week that I have thought about since. Our peer group has been meeting monthly for over 20 years and draws together GPs from Katikati to Whangamata. I mean committed GPs, as it is no mean feat to drive for over an hour each way on our rural roads in the middle of winter for an educational potluck at the end of a working day. The formal education is always supported by eating together and the associated talkfest has provided considerable support for us all over the years.

I heard one of my colleagues say this week, in the spirit of potluck of course, that Katikati provides better fluid than solid refreshment but the education is always worthwhile! That was a passing remark and does not relate to the difficult and unique issues around practising in the country which have been detailed so well by our rural representatives in the College and GP network for many years.

Rural GPs are a unique breed in lots of ways. Over the years some of our peer group members have moved on for all the reasons that rural GPs do – family, education or time for a change or a new challenge. Others have taken their place and still see challenges ahead in rural practice and a rural lifestyle for their families. We have an original but ageing core of members whose relationships have not succumbed to the difficulties, and whose children have survived their rural schools. These kids are in the middle of, or beyond, university, have done or are doing their OE or have begun their own professional lives. We are, or have, supported our parents through various stages of declining health and some may one day be challenged by, and involved with, a new generation – but true to the present trend of older parents, this is slow to happen.

Our meeting was held on Monday evening so the weekend duty was fresh in our minds. We chatted about cases, some of whom cross practice boundaries. We talked about the relief of reaching Monday evening having completed an on-call stint which straddles Friday morning to Monday afternoon. And the mental anticipation as we contemplate and build up to this marathon.

Of trying to stay constantly fresh and pleasant in the face of rude, cranky or trying people. We discovered that we all sleep poorly while on call even without a call – anticipating the phone will ring at any

minute or worrying that the telephone advice was misguided or the situation more serious than it seemed.

It is the common concern about coping with weekends on call in rural practice that I thought most about later. It is like preparing for a long distance race, physically and mentally, completing the marathon and then compulsorily getting ready to do it all over again without sufficient time in-between races to recover.

Older doctors may have done it all before but the reality is reactions get slower, natural caution is lost and enthusiasm certainly wanes.

The rural GP network has done an excellent job politically to raise public awareness and wring out some long overdue political promises to support rural New Zealanders. The promises might become reality or yet remain empty rhetoric. It is of critical concern whether the ageing rural stalwarts will be replaced by like-minded, committed GPs who still find challenge in general practice.