



This month, the RGPSA team caught up with Dr Harry Gaffney, who is a Rural Medical Intern in the Limestone Coast Local Health Network, primarily based in the emergency department at the Mount Gambier and Districts Health Service.

Harry is also an author, TEDx speaker alumnus, medical researcher, and rural health and pathology advocate.

Harry's primary research interests include rural health outcomes, and surgical, clinical, and anatomical pathology, particularly in immunohistochemistry and cancer biomarkers. His pathology research aims to improve patient diagnoses and health outcomes along with his interest in health communication research to improve patient health outcomes in rural care settings.



Dr Harry Gaffney

Though Harry grew up in the city of Adelaide, literally in the CBD, he absolutely loves the rural lifestyle, both clinically and socially. He has found the community and his medical colleagues welcoming and inspirational.

From treating seizures in cars one minute, to caring for paediatric patients the next – Harry has found rural work to be the best clinical foundation for his medical career.

We asked Harry a series of questions about the lifestyle and training experiences associated with living in and supporting one of our regional communities.



What led you to undertaking your internship in rural South Australia?

"I had some student rotations in anaesthetics and the ED at Mount Gambier during my final year of medicine. It was incredibly hands-on. I learned more in my ten weeks as a student than in any of the other metropolitan rotations combined.

I loved the community; I made some great friends in my short time here. I got to work alongside consultants and attend the most eye-opening grand rounds and impromptu teaching sessions. Why wouldn't I want to come back?"



Describe the type of clinical experience you get in your current role?

“With my consultant’s support, I have been able to go above and beyond my clinical role as an intern while working here. I’ve treated seizures in hospital carparks, cardiac arrests in the hospital café, and more. It sounds daunting, but I’ve never felt more supported by world-class physicians and consultants during my learning journey. I’ve experienced more than I ever thought possible while being in a safe and supportive environment. Even better, after it all, I get to go out to events and dinners with my consultants to debrief and let off steam.

I’m even working on several research projects with my peers and consultants. I feel both clinically and academically challenged and satisfied. I’m incredibly grateful for my choice to work here.”



How have you found living and working in a regional area and connecting with the local communities?

“The best thing about working as a rural doctor is treating the person who served you coffee the weekend before. Or the postie recognising you as the doctor who helped alleviate their pain and discomfort. Medicine can be a thankless job, but not rurally.

I’ve received a large amount of formal and informal positive recognition from my patients because your patients don’t see you as their doctor. They see you as their neighbour, as their friend.

The local community is incredible. I’m organising a local music session at the hospital, and the number of community members willing to participate is incredible. Everyone looks after one another here, in and out of the hospital.

We also have a Young Professional Group here. Because, for some people, arriving in Mount Gambier (and surrounds) might be the first time living away from friends and family. Connecting with people can positively impact their experience of living and remaining in the region. We regularly organise social events and casual catchups and welcome partners, colleagues, friends, and anyone you think would enjoy meeting new people.

Clinically or socially, no matter what, anyone visiting will feel welcomed and supported. I can guarantee that anyone who spends their time here won’t regret it.”



What are some of the unique experiences you've had during your intern year?

"On my first day, the first minute of my clinical intern shift, I had a patient with acute 10/10 abdominal pain. They were crying and screaming in pain. Before administering pain relief, I talked to my consultant, who immediately dropped everything and jumped into action. My consultant walked me through the appropriate analgesic and pain protocol and ensured I ordered it myself.

Their pain became well-controlled, and they were comfortable and happy.

I felt supported during this tense time I had never been exposed to and learned how to take control of future situations myself.

The patient was so grateful and sent some positive feedback about how well their pain was managed, and how cared for they felt thereafter."



Where to next in your career?

"I have a soft spot for pathology and the finer details of disease pathogenesis and aetiology. I love publishing research and looking into how to improve health outcomes in the long term.

I will end up in pathology at some stage, working on how to develop novel therapies. For the immediate future, though I'm more than academically and clinically satisfied at Mount Gambier on the front lines.

It's the best place to improve clinical reasoning and build the paramount foundations of any specialty.

I have no doubts that an internship (and beyond) here would equip anyone for an unrivalled lifestyle and clinical skills far beyond any metropolitan counterparts."



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March 2023



What advice do you have for medical students considering doing their internship in rural?

Just do it. Yes, relocating is a 24-hour hassle, but you're reimbursed, and it's an adventure! Life is short. Get out of your comfort zone and see what's available rurally! There is nothing to lose.

Once you're here, you'll be amazed at how satisfied you are working within a smaller community and getting to know all your peers on an unparalleled level.

Gratitude is the key to life satisfaction. Working in a close-knit environment alongside supportive peers and thankful patients will do wonders for your appreciation for medicine. Your consultants and colleagues notice the effort you put in.

Most importantly, you genuinely see the difference you make in the community. You treat acutely unwell patients in the hospital and then see them throwing a frisbee with their dog in the park, because of YOU.

You can't get this experience in populated regions.

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