



WESTERN NSW HEALTH RESEARCH NETWORK



ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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Co-Chairs Report 2025

As Co-Chairs of WHRN, we are pleased to present this report summarising our activities and achievements over the past year. The start of the year saw a few changes in the Executive, and we welcomed Jo Hunter as our new Secretary. In a short time, Jo has developed a new WHRN brand, and an excellent, interactive website (whrn.org.au).

A highlight of the year was the annual symposium, “Building Research Networks - Collaborative Approaches to Rural Health Research,” which highlighted the importance of collaboration in addressing the unique health challenges faced by rural communities in Western and Far Western NSW.

WHRN2025 was a resounding success, and I’d like to share with you some of the feedback received that warmed the hearts of the Executive team:

“Fantastic and friendly conference!”
“Outstanding”
“such a great culture of collaboration and learning”

We received over 100 Abstracts for consideration by the Scientific Committee, led by A/Prof. Melissa Nott, and welcomed a record numbers of attendees including researchers, clinicians and community members. We heard from a series of excellent keynote speakers, expanded knowledge and thinking, and developed connections across a series of workshops. The scientific sessions were well received, and showcased innovative research and collaborative approaches to rural health. There was a real buzz across the 2 days - with engaging discussions and a supportive environment of knowledge exchange.

One of the highlights of the symposium was the Researcher of the Year Awards Night held at Duntryleague, which provided a fabulous opportunity to celebrate the achievements of individuals within our network. A particularly special moment was the presentation of the “Catherine Hawke Emerging Researcher of the Year Award” to recognise the significant contributions of Prof. Catherine Hawke. This award not only honours Catherine’s dedication to advancing health research across the region, but also serves as an inspiration for emerging researchers.

The symposium provided an invaluable platform for networking, allowing attendees to connect and develop new collaborative partnerships. It was a delight to witness such a high representation of Aboriginal researchers and clinicians at WHRN2025 – and the inclusive approach at WHRN2025 reiterated the importance of working together, side by side, to address the health challenges faced by Aboriginal communities. Throughout the event, discussions emphasised the need for culturally appropriate research approaches and the need for Aboriginal perspectives to drive health research. One delegate commented: “I loved the Indigenous thread throughout the symposium”.

Dr Gerald Chitsunge from the Western NSW Primary Health Network presented the WHRN Sustainability Plan. This plan outlines a strategic roadmap for ensuring the continuation of WHRN and maximising the impact of our network across the region. The plan reflects our commitment to maintaining momentum in health research and developing ongoing collaboration among stakeholders and community members.

As we look toward 2026, we believe that WHRN is in a strong position to continue influencing and improving health outcomes for the communities of Western and Far Western NSW. The enthusiasm and engagement we saw at the symposium reaffirms our collective commitment to advancing health research and collaboration in the region.

We would like to extend a special thanks and farewell to Karen Paxton, a stalwart of WHRN, for her significant contributions over the past decade. Her dedication and leadership have been instrumental in

shaping the direction of our network, and she will be greatly missed.

We are excited about the opportunities that lie ahead and remain committed to supporting a collaborative research environment that addresses the health needs of our communities.

Catherine and Deb

WHRN Executive Members 2024-2025

Co-Chair	Catherine Keniry, Charles Sturt University
Co-Chair First Nations	Deborah Kenna OAM, Western NSW Local Health District
Deputy Chair	Alice Munro, Western NSW Local Health District
Chair Scientific Committee	Melissa Nott, Three Rivers Department of Rural Health, Charles Sturt University
Secretary	Jo Hunter, Charles Sturt University
Treasurer	Karen Paxton, Three Rivers Department of Rural Health, Charles Sturt University
Communications Officer	Jo Hunter, Charles Sturt University
Public Officer	Levi Osuagwu, Western Sydney University
Education and Training Officer	Shannon Pike, University of New South Wales
Ordinary Members	Catherine Hawke, School of Rural Health, University of Sydney
	Giti Haddadan, Broken Hill University Department of Rural Health

WHRN Networking Group Members

Bila Muuji Aboriginal Corporation Health Service	TBC
Charles Sturt University	Julian Grant, Jodie Kleinschafer
Health Education Training Institute (HETI)	David Schmidt
Marathon Health	Matt Thomas
Rural Health Research Institute	Julaine Allan, Hazel Dalton
University of Sydney – School of Rural Health, Orange	Emily Saurman
Western NSW Primary Health Network	Gerald Chitsunge

WHRN2025 Symposium Review

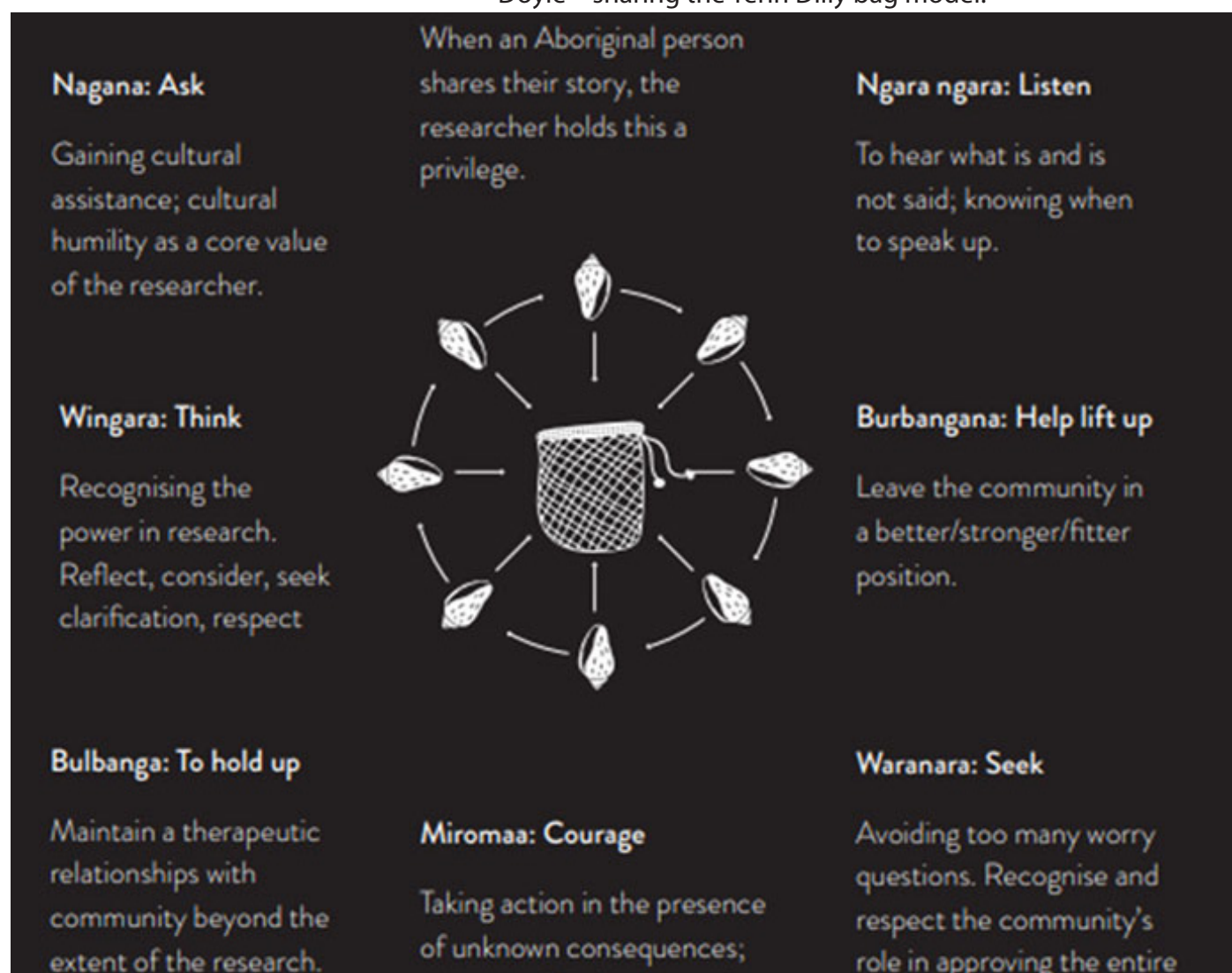
WHRN2025, held on November 3rd and 4th, at Charles Sturt University Orange Campus, served as an opportunity for sharing innovative research and developing collaboration among health professionals, researchers, and community stakeholders in Western and Far Western NSW. With a record sold-out attendance of 175 delegates, and over 100 Abstract submissions, it was a demonstration of the importance of WHRN to the community and the impact WHRN has had, and will continue to have across our region. The feedback received from delegates throughout the event, and in the post-event delegate survey, was wonderful.

We were fortunate with the weather on Monday – and were grateful to commence proceedings with a Welcome to Country by Wiradjuri Elder, Ricky Ahsee from Orange Aboriginal Lands Council, emphasising



the importance of Aboriginal perspectives in health research. The first day featured a workshop titled “The Rural Health Research Journey in Western NSW: From Idea to Publication,” delivered by colleagues at Western NSW LHD. It was an extremely engaging session with over 60 delegates participating.

The inclusive session on Aboriginal health Research was well attended and delegates enjoyed the Pathways to partnerships introductory session by Co-Chair Deb Kenna and Aunty Kerrie Doyle – sharing the Yerin Dilly bag model:





Lynette Bullen shared her research journey, followed by a multi-organisational team speaking on establishment of Aboriginal voices at the centre of eating disorder research. This session set the tone for subsequent discussions on building effective research teams and utilising AI tools, and the framework of implementation science.

The speed-dating style networking session facilitated was fast paced and fun. Participants had the opportunity to engage with a variety of research networks during this session, which was sponsored by the USyd Networks and aimed at connecting

USYD Networks	
Digital Health and Informatics Network	Dr Cathy Barnett (for Dr Melissa Brunner)
Cardiovascular Network	A/Prof Georgina Luscombe / Dr Cathy Barnett
Cancer Research Network	A/Prof Helen McGuire / Dr Cathy Barnett
Academic Implementation Science Network	A/Prof Leanne Hassett / Dr Cathy Barnett
Community and Primary Health Care Network Cancer	Prof Meredith Makeham / Dr Cathy Barnett
USYD Centres	
Matilda Centre (Youth Mental Health and Substance Abuse)	Louise Thornton / Dr Cathy Barnett
Westmead Applied Research Centre	Kam Wong / Dr Cathy Barnett
The Leeder Centre – Health Economics & Data	A/Prof Martin Howell / Dr Cathy Barnett
Heat and Health Research Impact Centre	RECORDING / Dr Cathy Barnett
Centre for Disability Research Policy	Shane Clifton / Dr Cathy Barnett
Musculoskeletal Centre	Stephanie Beshara / Dr Cathy Barnett
Western NSW / Regional Research Networks	
WHRN Aboriginal Research Interest Group	A/Prof Georgina Luscombe
Care-Diabetes Partnership	Leah Pascoe, WNSWPHN
Rural Applied Drug and Alcohol Network	Dr Catherine Keniry
The Ageing Well Research Group, CSU	Dr Deborah Magee
The Manna Institute	Dr Hazel Dalton
The Women's Translational Research Network	Aunty Kerrie Doyle
NSW Regional Health Partners TBC	Lisa McFayden

Facilitated by Prof. Julaine Allan

The promised Networking Program can be found here: [WHRN2025 Networking Session Slides](#)

collaborators from diverse backgrounds and expertise.

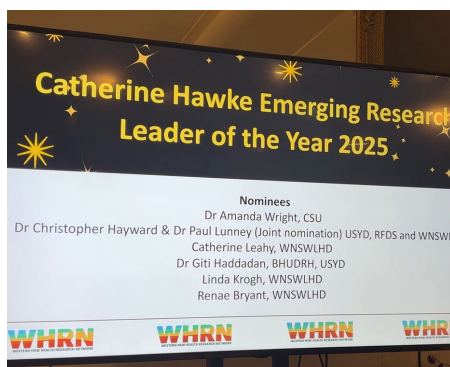
The Western NSW Researcher of the Year Awards Gala Dinner, held at Duntryleague, was a highlight of





the symposium. Commencing with Aboriginal dance troupes from local Orange schools. Guests were treated to 2 beautiful performances on the Duntryleague lawn, followed by a welcome to country by local Wiradjuri Elder and legend, Neil Ingram.

The Awards featured the Inaugural 'Catherine Hawke' Emerging Researcher of the Year award – awarded to CSU medical student Dr Amanda Wright. Dr Alice Munro delivered a special tribute to the WHRN Founder, Professor Hawke, and recognised the significant impact Catherine has had on research across



our region, as well as medical education.

Abstract Awards

Best General Abstract:

Elsie de Klerk - Three Rivers Dept of Rural Health

What makes us Sing Out? The essential elements of a regional, inclusive dementia choir

Best Open Abstract

Emily Murphy - Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association

Factors influencing the recruitment and retention of primary health care nurses in rural and remote areas: An evidence-based approach.

Best Emerging Abstract

Cindy Earl - Murrumbidgee Local Health District

How to support clinical pathway use in emergency departments to treat cardiac symptoms: A project prioritising rural clinician perspectives

Best Student Abstract

Leigh Davison- Marathon Health & Charles Sturt University

Evaluation of SW Connect: A virtual group supervision program for rural and remote social workers

Researcher of the Year Awards

Catherine Hawke Emerging Researcher of the Year

Amanda Wright

Aboriginal Research Leader of the Year

Professor Michelle Dickson

Health Research Academic Leader of the Year

A/Prof Kerrie Noonan – WNSWLHD

Clinical Research Leader of the Year

Rodney Hammond

It was a wonderful evening enjoyed by all - celebrating outstanding contributions to rural health



research, held at a fabulous venue with excellent company and delicious food!

DAY 2

On the second day, the symposium opened with an Acknowledgement of Country by Deb Kenna, followed by the official launch of the scientific program by A/Professor Melissa Nott.

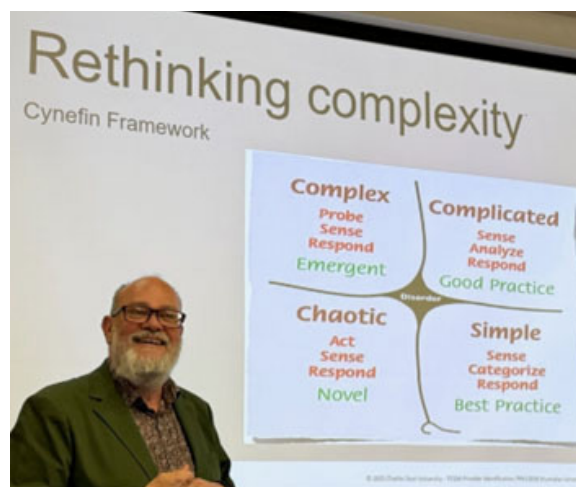
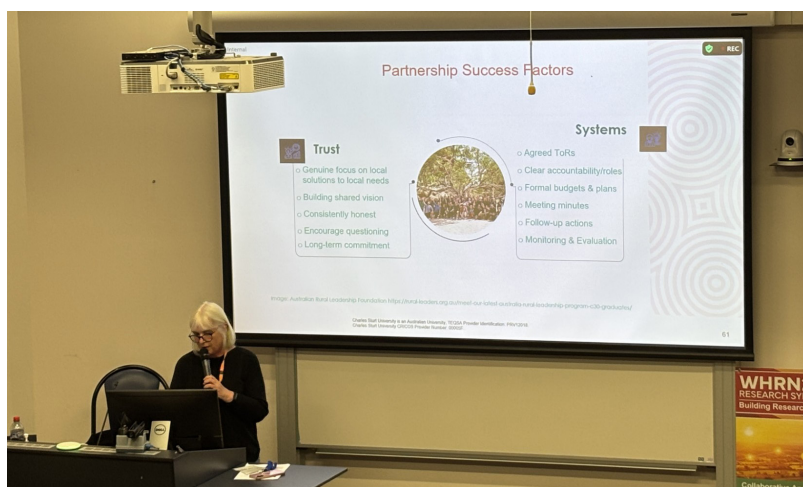
Dr Gerald Chitsunge delivered the WHRN Sustainability Plan, followed by a keynote address by Dr. Reakeeta Smallwood focused on "Holding space for 'tricking the trickster': Relational accountability and Aboriginal ethics in community health research," emphasizing the need for ethical frameworks that respect Aboriginal cultural values in research practices. Reakeeta's passionate delivery was inspiring to all in the room – and provided much food for thought. Reakeeta's personal experiences and poem sharing



was a highlight.

The scientific symposium showcased a diverse range of presentations, including emerging research on dementia care, virtual health initiatives, and the impacts of social prescribing in rural communities. Notable studies included an exploration of the essential elements of inclusive dementia choirs, the challenges faced by rural health practitioners, access for rural communities, and a retrospective study on emergency medical transport in rural settings.

Keynote speaker Prof. Sharon Brownie discussed “Improving Health Equity and Access: The Power of Collaborative Networks,” reinforcing the significance of partnerships in enhancing healthcare delivery in rural areas. The symposium also featured lightning talks that provided a platform, over lunch, for emerging researchers to present their work, creating an environment of knowledge exchange and



collaboration.

The event concluded with a closing keynote by Prof. Tony Dreise, who addressed the theme of First Nations health research, focusing on the need to address systemic gaps in health outcomes for Aboriginal communities. Tony Dreise shared some tragic statistics including that 1 in 5 Aboriginal children will have at least one parent incarcerated in their lifetime.

Melissa Nott wrapped up WHRN2025 with awards for outstanding scientific contributions and a reflection on the importance of continued collaboration in rural health research.

Scientific Program Awards

Best Open Oral Presentation:

Diana Kubowicz, Alice Gordon & Wendy Holmes

Supporting Aboriginal Health Practitioners to Vaccinate Mob

Best Emerging Oral Presentation:

Luke Marks

Real-World Implementation of Nursing Professional Practice and Leadership Frameworks: A Scoping Review Highlighting Rural Healthcare Knowledge Gaps

Best Student Oral Presentation:

Jacob Stretton

Are Rural Australian STEMI patients disproportionately affected by LVEF Dysfunction?

Best General Oral Presentation:

Uchechukwu Levi Osuagwu

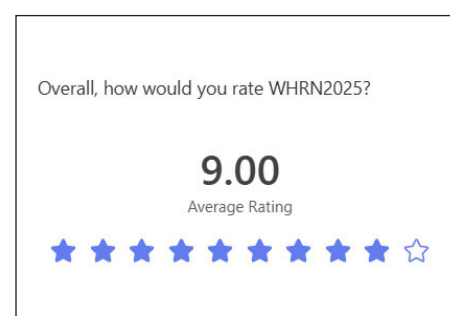
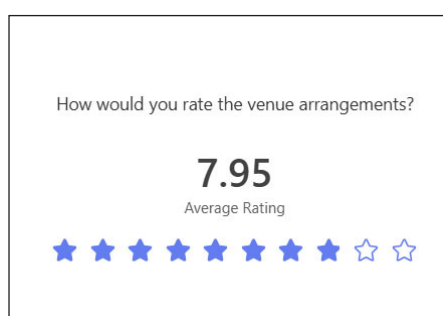
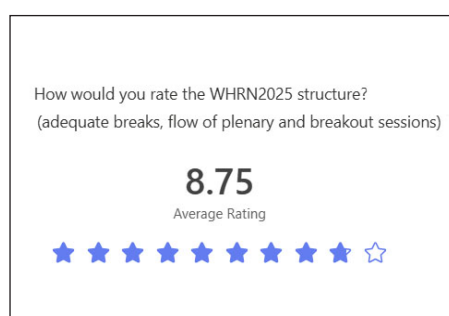
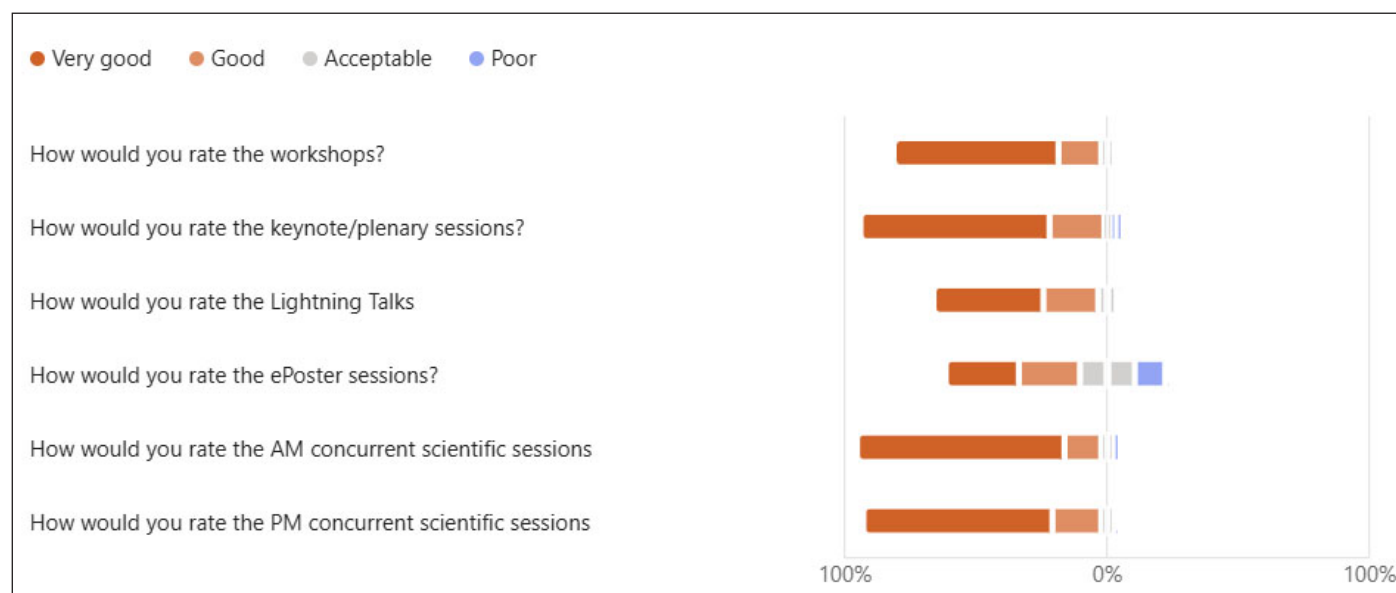
The Impact of the Bathurst Men's Walk and Talk Program on Well-Being Outcomes in Rural Men - A Cross-Sectional Study

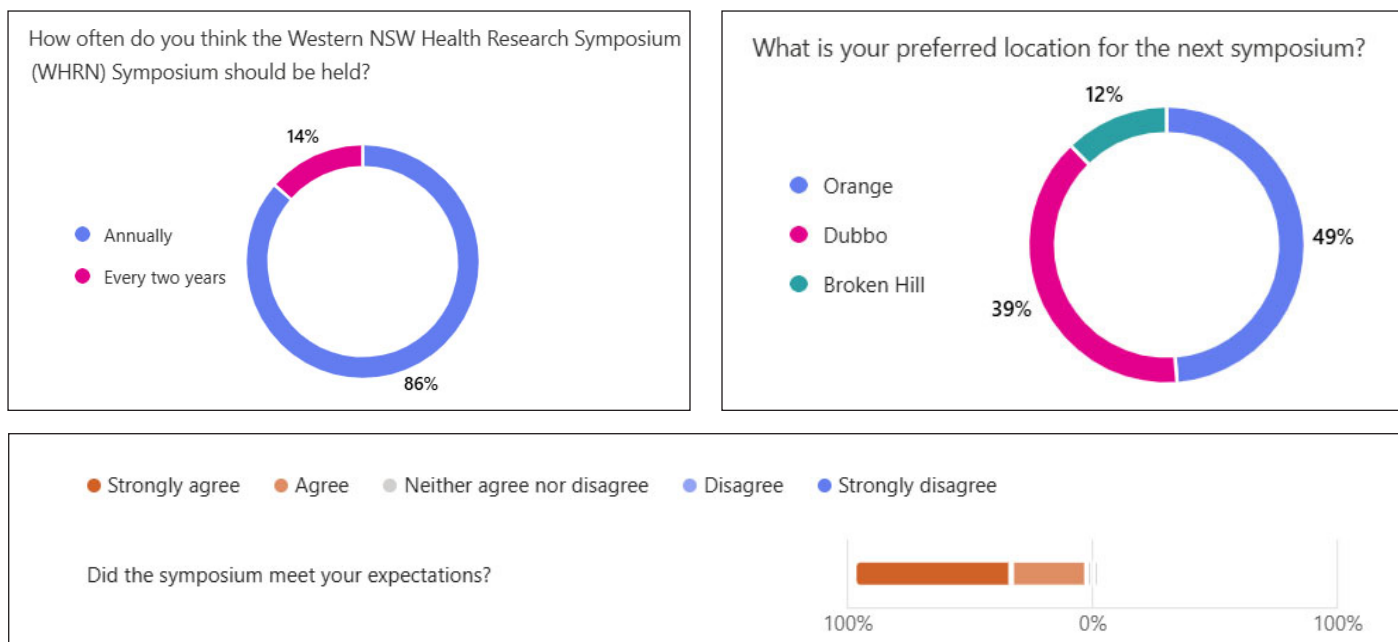
People's Choice e-Poster:

Clare Sutton

Fatigue on the frontline: Paramedic insights into organisational influences

The insights gained from this symposium have the potential to significantly impact rural health outcomes in Western and Far Western NSW. By supporting collaborative networks and emphasising ethical and culturally appropriate research practices, the symposium highlighted pathways to enhance healthcare access and equity for rural populations. The ongoing research efforts discussed during the event are crucial for addressing the unique health challenges faced by rural communities and for promoting sustainable health initiatives.





WHRN2025 Feedback Quotes

Thank you WHRN team! You should be so proud. The awards dinner and food has been wonderful. Same again for next year please!

Fantastic and friendly conference!

I loved the Indigenous thread throughout the symposium

Outstanding

Best WHRN to date.

Thanks - such a great culture of collaboration and learning.

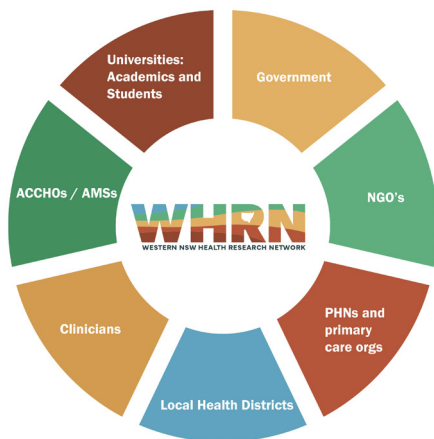
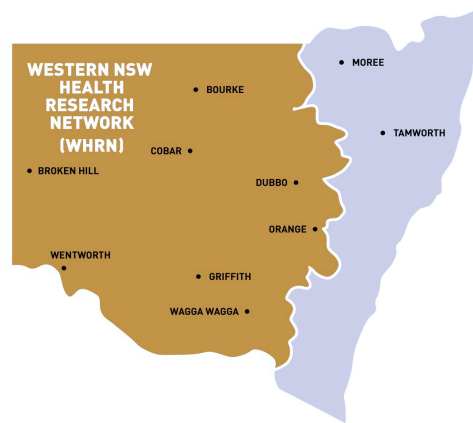
My only suggestion relates to the e-posters - they were not displayed in a way that enabled interaction, it would be ideal to have more screens and allotted times so that attendees can view posters and talk with authors.

Sustainability Plan 2025-2028

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHRN is a collaborative rural health research network established in 2013, spanning 65% of NSW

WHRN connects universities, LHDs, PHNs, ACCHOs, NGOs, and communities to deliver culturally safe, locally relevant research.



Key Achievements

- Western NSW Drug & Alcohol Research Hub
- 12 annual Rural Health Research Symposiums
- Rural research capacity building

This sustainability plan sets out a strategic path to strengthen WHRN's leadership, scale its impact, and ensure long-term resilience in addressing rural health inequities.

PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

Purpose: Build long-term resilience and maintain regional research leadership

Why Now: Rural inequities remain urgent; WHRN has momentum to scale.

Our Impact So Far: Drug & Alcohol Research Hub, annual symposia, mentoring, and multi-sector partnerships

MISSION

Drive community-informed research to improve rural health

VISION

A trusted network transforming health systems through evidence



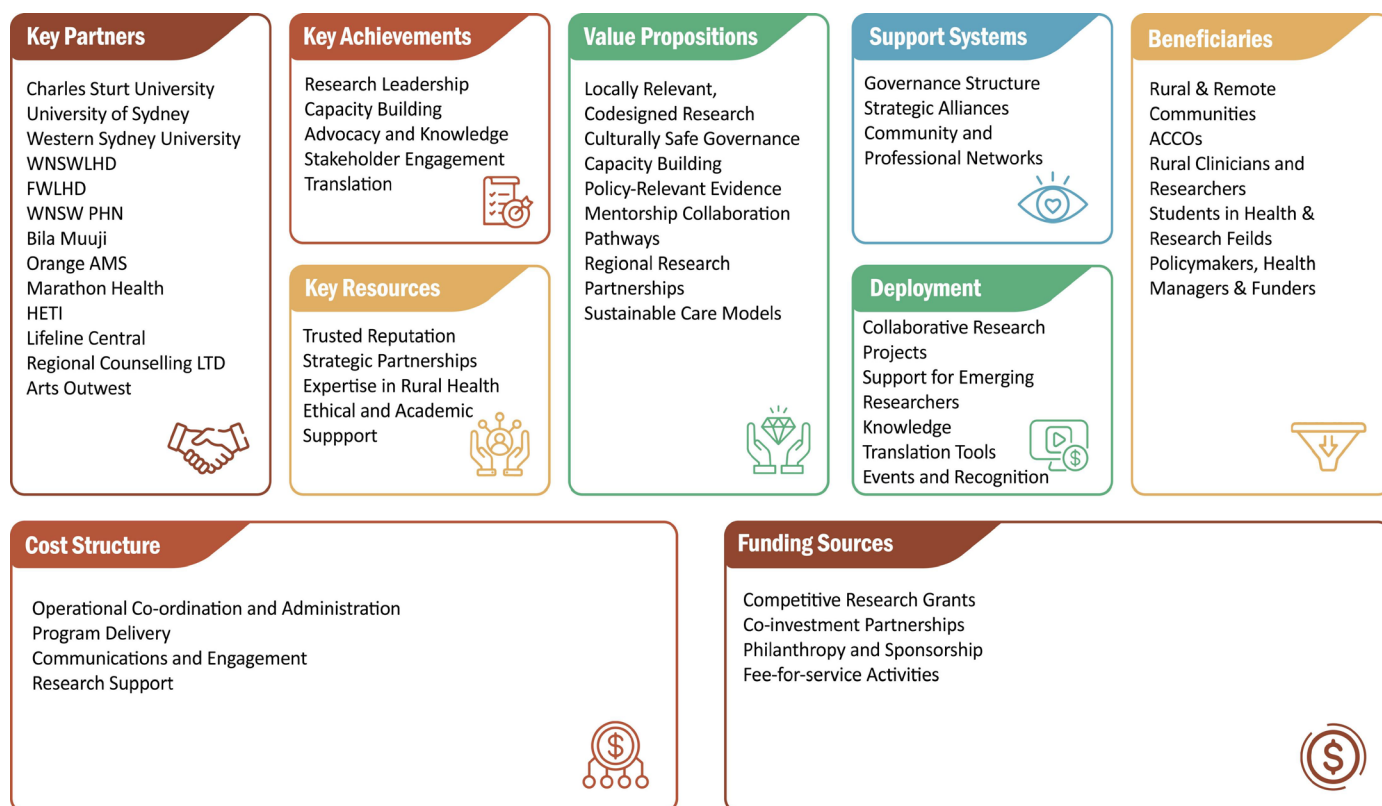
OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

We believe that ...	Therefore...
Community-led research leads to sustainable solutions	Co-design with Aboriginal & rural communities via ARIG and C-RIG
Equity-focused research must reflect lived experience	Embed cultural governance and community research leadership
Rural capability is foundational to transformation	Invest in rural fellowships, mentoring, micro-credentialing
Evidence must influence health reform	Produce policy briefs, impact reports, and engage policymakers
Collaboration enhances credibility and scale	Strengthen joint ventures and inter-institutional partnerships

OUR STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Strategic Question	WHRN Strategic Response
What is our aspiration?	Lead place-based, culturally safe, and policy-relevant research
Where will we focus?	Western & Far Western NSW; partner with Aboriginal and local organisations
How will we deliver value?	Co-design, strategic partnerships, researcher capability, policy engagement
What capabilities are key?	Community governance, impact measurement, cultural facilitation, digital platforms
What systems support us?	WHRN Executive, ARIG, integrated M&E, partner co-governance

OUR MISSION MODEL CANVAS



WHAT WHRN OFFERS STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholder	Value Delivered
Rural Communities	Health research that reflects their lived realities
Aboriginal Organisations	Cultural leadership and governance
Clinicians & Researchers	Training, mentorship, and regional research career development
LHDs, PHNs	Co-designed, regionally relevant projects to inform planning
Policymakers	ROI through scalable, impact-driven, place-based evidence
Universities	
Health Service Organisations	
Philanthropic Organisations	Support of an organisation that delivers evidence based improvements in the quality of life of those who live in rural and remote Australia

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

1. Diversify and Secure Funding
2. Strengthen Rural Research Capability
3. Align with Policy and Planning Systems

NEXT STEPS

Help Sustain WHRN

- Rural voices deserve a strong research platform
- WHRN can't grow without new members and strategic partners
- Join WHRN as an individual member, partner organisation, or executive member

Engage Stakeholders

- Consult with Executive Committee, ARIG/C-RIG, and partner organisations. Ensure co-governance and cultural leadership are embedded

Secure Resources

- Identify funding opportunities and co-investment pathways. Explore fee-for-service models and philanthropic partnerships.

Develop Operational Plan

- Define clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability structures. Set deliverables, timelines, and performance indicators. Integrate monitoring, evaluation, and reporting mechanisms.

Communicate and Mobilise

- Share the plan through symposia, digital platforms, and partner channels. Begin phased implementation with regular progress review

Education Survey Results 2024 and 2025

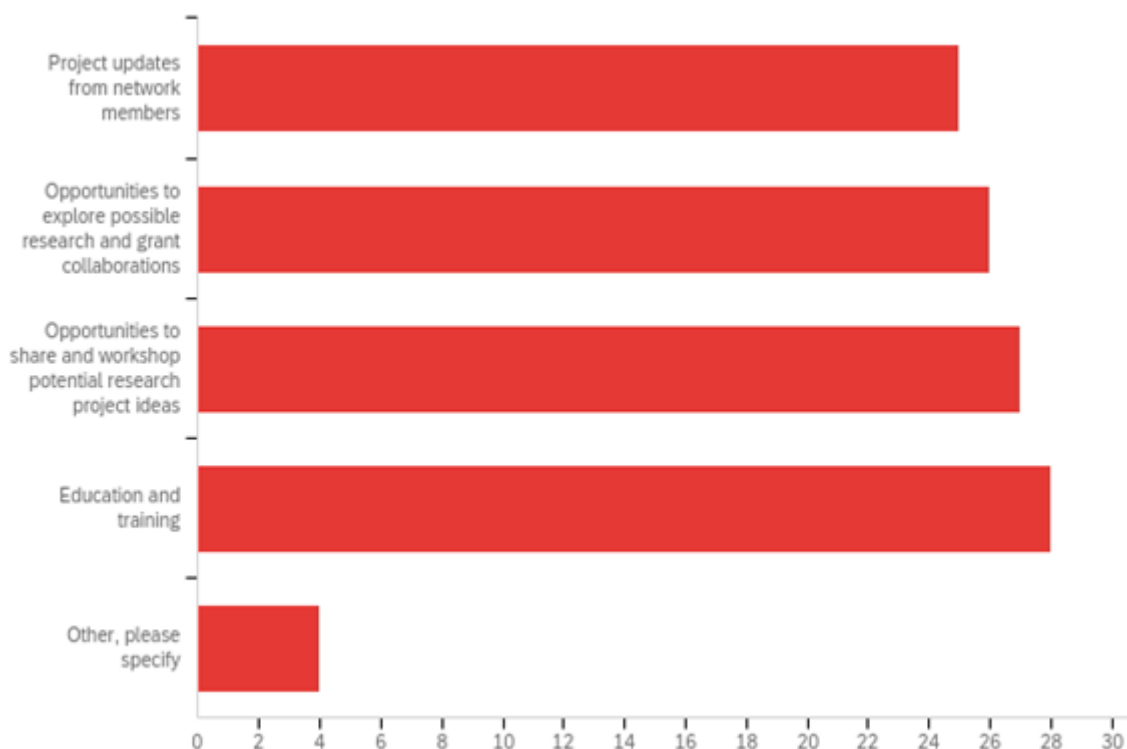
The 2024 WHRN Symposium attendees were invited to complete an anonymous survey to identify member (and potential future member) interests for Network Meeting topics, and education needs/interests that WHRN could support beyond those already offered through LHD's and the RR-CLaN. A total of 59 responses were received.

WHRN Membership

n=18 (31%) were members, n=27 (46%) were not members and n=14 (24%) were unsure.

WHRN Network Meeting Topics

The topics preferred to be included in Bimonthly network meetings are presented in Figure 1 below.



'Other' topics included Consumer engagement /Co-design, Support and strategies to lead local research conducted in collaboration with metropolitan researchers/academics and learning from shared 'research failures'.

Education and Training Support

Four areas for education and research were identified from responses.

- Practical research skills including literature searching techniques, research writing seminars, recruitment strategies, how to generate research ideas, co-design, consumer engagement and meaningful measurement.
- Research capacity building
- Identifying and applying for grants
- Many respondents (n=31, 63%) were not aware or accessing education through RR-CLaN.

2025 Actions

- Distribute RR-CLaN and additional external learning opportunities via the WHRN website and newsletter.
- Recommence WHRN Network meetings and education targeting identified topics: how to write a conference abstract (completed July), recruitment challenges in rural research (completed September), and seek options for academic writing workshops (OHMR grant application submitted, ongoing).

Education and Training support ideas from WHRN2025 Survey

- AI in healthcare and regional healthcare
- Collaborations between unis and health services. Funding options.
- Telehealth developments
- Qualitative; frameworks and grant writing “Publishing Ethics submission”
- Paths to PHD
- Ethics approval support
- Perhaps support/guidance on writing research reports for medical students
- Training on project management skills (as research is project work)
- A local HDR student group, in person or online could compliment the existing network
- Tips and tricks for early-mid career researchers
- Social determinants of health (e.g., finance and economics)
- Aboriginal Workforce Disability

Financial Report 1 July 2024 – 30 June 2025

Prepared by Karen Paxton – Treasurer

Opening balance: \$133,336.70

Closing balance: \$103,442.49

The financial year from 1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025 was a period of strong financial performance for WHRN, driven primarily by successful symposium activities and strategic sponsorship partnerships.

Total Income: Approximately \$91,000, sourced mainly from symposium ticket sales (\$41,447.05) sponsorships from Charles Sturt University, Three River Department of Rural Health, Orange Aboriginal Medical Service, Central West Lifeline, The University of Sydney, School of Rural Health and project funding from Western NSW Primary Health Network (\$19,092).

Total Expenses: Approximately \$95,000, with the largest outlays for catering and venue hire (\$30,000+), event streaming and IT support (\$13,800+), cultural performances, and printing/signage.

Key Points

The Symposium generated reasonable revenue but also incurring substantial costs in this period, predominately spent on payments to Karen Paxton to manage and deliver the 2023 Symposium and engaging the events management group GRO Events for the 2024 Symposium.

Recurring costs (subscriptions, insurance) remained stable throughout the year.

	Income			Expenses		
	22/23	23/24	24/25	22/23	23/24	24/25
Membership	\$ 41,000.00	\$ 81,000.00	\$8,000.00			
Sponsorship	\$ 33,800.00	\$ 41,400.00	\$22,500.00			
Ticket sales (less fees)	\$ 15,008.30	\$ 13,970.75	\$41,474.05			
Research Income - ePrescribing WNSWPHN	\$ -	\$ -	\$19,092.00			
Interest	\$ 99.15	\$ 186.85	\$142.57			
Contract salary				\$ 25,334.65	\$ 45,941.94	\$ 17,324.74
Events Management						\$ 36,575.00
Admin/Office/Subscriptions				\$ 931.15	\$ 1,819.53	\$ 1,148.79
Insurance				\$ 1,199.00	\$ 1,270.50	\$ 1,804.00
Symposium expenses				\$ 30,019.05	\$ 30,902.31	\$ 64,250.03
TOTALS	\$ 89,907.45	\$ 136,557.60	\$ 91,208.62	\$ 57,483.85	\$ 79,934.28	\$ 121,102.56

The Western NSW Health Research Network Inc wishes to thank the following organisations for their support over 2024/25



**Charles Sturt
University**



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



**Western NSW
Local Health District**



**Far West
Local Health District**



Broken Hill
University Department of Rural Health



**HEALTH
EDUCATION
& TRAINING**



An Australian Government Initiative



**Orange Aboriginal
Medical Service**



**LOWITJA
INSTITUTE**