

Transcript – Fostering collaboration, innovation and idea sharing between educational, academic, industry, community in remote and rural areas.

Host: Alana MacLeod

Speaker: Leigh Mair, Scottish Rural Health Partnership

Alana MacLeod:

This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. I'm Alana MacLeod and in this episode, we'll be talking to Leigh Mair, Business Development Manager for the Scottish Rural Health Partnership. Leigh, thank you for joining me today!

Leigh Mair:

Hi Alana, thanks so much for inviting me along.

Alana MacLeod:

No, it's great to have you. So we'll kick off; Leigh, please tell us a little bit about the Scottish Rural Health Partnership, the partnership's aims and objectives, and a little bit about your role there.

Leigh Mair:

Okay, sure. So, the Scottish Rural Health Partnership (SRHP) is now being hosted by the division of rural health and wellbeing, which is part of the institute of health research and innovation. So we're now in our fourth year of support funding from the university's innovation fund. The University of Highlands and Islands has been able to provide administrative inputs to enable the partnership to really grow and develop. The SRHP is a membership organisation with a small executive group to run the partnership and a steering group to support the executive group in an advisory oversight capacity providing advice, expertise, and supporting knowledge exchange and information sharing. The vision? Well, really, it's to consolidate the Scottish Rural Health Partnership as an innovative National and International Centre which acts as an umbrella organisation to foster strategic development and collaborative partnership, contributing to Scotland's rural health and social care story, using data to inform policy development, strategy planning and delivery of remote and rural health and wellbeing, that delivers improved long term health outcomes for rural communities. Really our aim is to be the leading authority and source of knowledge on remote and rural population health and social care. To be a strong advocate for equity and wellbeing in rural and remote areas of Scotland, and a key contributor to developing and shaping rural and remote health and wellbeing policy.

Our research will be guided by the pursuit of excellence and improving rural health outcomes, embedded engagement with communities, government, clinicians and research, education, and health related organisations, through the nurturing of research capacities support expansion of existing internal and external multidisciplinary relationships. The development of new partnerships, with dissemination and implementation of ours and others research, will reduce population health inequities, and promote improvements in remote and rural health and social care.

And really, we're just passionate about all things rural, remote, island, health, and social care. So I started with the SRHP just at the end of last year, and some of my job is to ensure commercial engagement, and to develop this strategy for the SRHP moving forward, and also to manage the budget and spend. I've also got responsibility for marketing and communications, and to do some to report writing and business case development, and really promote the SRHP vision and aims. I've also been working closely with MSPs recently to promote the issue of health inequalities in rural and remote communities in Scotland, so that's a bit of a synopsis of what we're up to, Alana!

Alana MacLeod:

It sounds really interesting and really varied as well, which I'm sure means that your role is always really interesting. So, you know, key to this is collaboration obviously, so I was wondering if you might be able to give us some examples of key innovations and collaborations which have maybe led to more effective remote and rural healthcare in the Highlands and Islands?

Leigh Mair:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the big things that we do is the 'Rethinking Remote' conference. The conference seeks to foster thoughts and idea sharing to find solutions to many of the challenges of providing health care in remote in rural communities worldwide.

The wide network of national and international colleagues with involvement in remote and rural health care include partners and stakeholders from academia, healthcare, education, health and social care providers, the armed forces, and industry. And for example, some of the things that we look at at the conference, which generally runs over two years...unfortunately, we weren't able to do the conference due to COVID-19, but we're looking forward to doing another big conference in 2022. Just to give a bit an example of the themes the themes in the 2018 conference were emergency management and pre-hospital care, education and professional support, community engagement, technology – and that includes drones, robots, satellites and remote diagnosis and communication – and community care, including physical and mental health and wellbeing.

We're also really proud and excited to be a partner or the European Connected Health Alliance, and we've established a new mental health ecosystem in the highlands and Islands, along with Highlands and Islands Enterprise. And, we're really excited for this opportunity because it creates a new permanently mutually beneficial partnership for the Highlands and Islands, which really focuses on rural mental health and active healthy ageing with the dual aim of improving the delivery of rural health and social care services and providing economic benefits. So, the last ecosystem pop-up ecosystem webinar was in October, which you can access via our website. And looking to the future, we're really excited to become more involved directly in research into social care and primary care, and we're going to be doing that with partners and academia and industry, and also the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh.

Alana MacLeod:

Fantastic, thanks Leigh. So, what I'll do actually is put a link to the website, along with the descriptor for this podcast so that people can pop on and have a look themselves. Some very cool stuff there, which is exciting.

So the university, obviously has a number of students across the Highlands and Islands, which skills do you think are maybe key for those who might, you know, aspire to work in the health and social care sectors in remote and rural areas. Are there any particular traits that might be useful for students, or soon to be graduates?

Leigh Mair:

Yeah, I've been thinking about this and I'm not sure there's any specific skills – I think just a general enthusiasm for the topic and a real desire to work in remote and rural populations, whether that be in health or social care. I mean I'd like to take the opportunity to signpost students or prospective student to look at some really great organisations. There's one called Iriss (which is I-R-I-S-S) – they look at social work, and remote and rural communities, and they are doing a really super series of workshops and webinars at the moment, I'd really recommend. Maybe we can put these links in as well, Alana?

Alana MacLeod:

Yeah, absolutely.

Leigh Mair:

...and the Royal College of Nursing produced a really good report, as well, called 'Going the Extra Mile' which looks at nursing in rural and remote communities. And also NHS Education for Scotland has rural and remote sections to it, that's really good as well, so I'd really recommend students to look at these different sections. I think it would be really useful for them.

Alana MacLeod:

Excellent. No, that's fine, we'll do that. It's always really useful to have people who are in the industry pass on information about where is a good source of information, so absolutely happy to do that. The health and social care sector is obviously enormous, diverse, ever-changing, and evolving. Can you tell us a little bit about your career journey and how you got to where you are today?

Leigh Mair:

Yeah, of course, it's sort of a bit random really, Alana!

Alana MacLeod:

They so often are!

Leigh Mair:

I did an undergraduate in physiotherapy, and then did not really work particularly clinically. I really enjoyed doing the degree, but then I joined the pharmaceutical industry, pretty much straight after working in a sales and marketing capacity, so as a pharmaceutical representative initially. So I had a pretty long career in the pharma industry. Subsequently, working in public affairs, so doing lobbying with MSPs etcetera, and also doing some market access, which is when a new drug comes to market or a new device comes to market, and you have to work with the officials to look at how that's going to be provided and look at different prices and things like that. Quite interesting, but I mean I've always had an interest in rural and remote health care, so when my daughter was quite small, I decided to take a bit of a career break and do some further education, and actually went to the University of the Highlands and Islands to do a master's in health and wellbeing, with a sort of specialist interest in diabetes and rural and remote healthcare, which was amazing – I'd really recommend it! I'm not an academic by any stretch of the imagination, but it was such a good thing to do. I learned so much. The job with the rural health partnership came up and I thought it was a good combination of my previous skills in pharma and then some of the new work that I'd been doing in rural and remote healthcare, so it was a good combination! In some shape or form I've been with UHI for a good few years now, and I thoroughly recommend that I've enjoyed every minute.

Alana MacLeod:

It's funny, when we ask people to sort of reflect on their career journey, you know, it's always random...it's never really what people expect maybe when they're younger and starting out on their career path. You know, there's all these different twists and turns that send people into different roles or down different educational paths, it's always really interesting to hear a bit more about that. Reflecting on your educational and work experiences, and given the current sector context, is there any advice that you would give to students and graduates who are maybe aspiring to work in, or are currently working in remote and rural healthcare, not just in the Highlands and Islands but sort of across the board?

Leigh Mair:

Well, I think the advice that I'd like to give to students and graduates aspiring to work in rural and remote health and social care, is just really go for it! It's such a great opportunity to make a really

huge difference to that particular community. I'd also like to point out that there's so many really great resources in rural health and social care, and people are involved in doing some really super work, both in the United Kingdom and Scotland – in our four nations – and also internationally. And I mean if you do want to know more about it and you are interested then, then please do look us up on the UHI website – Scottish Rural Health Partnership – you can become a member, and also you can email us directly and we'll try and help.

Alana MacLeod:

Brilliant. Thanks Lee. I think that's been really good in terms of signposting as well. That's really, really useful.

Leigh Mair:

It's quite important, that's kind of what we do at the partnership. So we might not have the information directly, but we can signpost people to the best place that they can go to, definitely... that's what we're about. If you are a member then you do get like an E newsletter and we have social media. Just to keep up to date with all the events, because there is a lot of events but unless you're registered with the with individual organisation, you might not always get the alerts, but at least we sort of put everything together in one area so that you're aware of the events that are happening. There's lots of things that are going on in this arena and it really is quite exciting.

Alana MacLeod:

Great. Leigh, thank you so much for joining me today. It was great to hear from you!

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