

MEDIA RELEASE

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Ballarat Doctors honoured for their service

The 2009 Victorian Rural Doctors' Awards acknowledged Ballarat doctors Royce Baxter and Ross Wilkie for their commitment to the region at a ceremony last Friday night in Melbourne.

Doctors Baxter and Wilkie were recipients of the 35 Years of Service to Rural Communities Award.

Victorian rural doctors were nominated by their peers, patients and local community members in three categories, *35 Years Service to Rural Communities*, for *Outstanding Contribution to Rural Communities* or as a *New Rural Doctor*.

Health Minister, Hon. Daniel Andrews presented the doctors and their families with the awards in front of 225 guests at a gala dinner.

Rural Workforce Agency Victoria (RWAV) chief executive Claire Austin explains the Awards' significance.

"The Awards provide an opportunity to pause and reflect on the contributions that our doctors and their families make to Victoria.

"Additionally, the Awards offer Victorians a way of saying 'thanks' to a corner stone of the population that sustain local communities in so many ways," Ms Austin said.

The 2009 Award recipients were from all corners of the state including, Sale, St Leonards, Moe, Elmore, Lorne, Ouyen, Trafalgar, Mount Beauty, Beechworth, Wangaratta, Portland, Lakes Entrance, Benalla, Phillip Island, Traralgon and Camperdown.

RWAV chairman Dr Philip Webster also paid tribute to this year's recipients.

"As is the nature of general practice and medicine these contributions have been diverse and broad ranging.

"Amongst all the recipients honoured, the common thread was doctors sustaining their local community," Dr Webster said.

An awards panel comprising RWAV, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, Australian College of Rural & Remote Medicine, Rural Doctors Association of Victoria Australian Medical Association Vic and Rural Medical Family Network representatives assessed nominees against the criteria for each of the categories.

The Awards were proudly sponsored by Victorian Managed Insurance Authority (VMIA), a statutory body established to provide risk management consultancy, insurance and site risk surveys to Victorian State Government departments and agencies.

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Background information

Recognised for their **35 Years Service to Rural Communities**

Dr Royce Baxter, Ballarat.

I can't walk down the street in Ballarat without being stopped by one of my former patients – it's terrific!

For 36 years, I worked in the Ballarat Group Practice, treating thousands of people. I retired last year.

I graduated from Medicine in 1971. I'd always been attracted to the country lifestyle – my hobbies were fishing and hunting – and my family had a farm outside of Melbourne. So, when I chose where to go for my Residency with my new wife, Jenny, the fact that the Ballarat Hospital had married quarters sealed the deal.

After two years at the hospital while also working as a GP locum in Beaufort on weekends, I joined the Ballarat Group Practice.

My area of special medical interest was diabetes. I pursued this via work in clinics for both elderly and adolescent diabetics, studied and worked at the Hammersmith Hospital in London, was an Honorary Clinical Associate in diabetes for 20 years at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, I've educated other GPs and the community extensively in the management of diabetes and conducted much research into the area.

A special thrill was in 1975 when I had a paper published in the Lancet showing the first link between Down Syndrome and Hypothyroidism. Something I'd noticed observationally in a rural general practice was significant enough to be published in the Lancet - quite a unique thing.

In 2001, I was granted Life Fellowship to senior medical staff at the Royal Melbourne. I've also been fortunate enough to have committee roles with the RACGP.

One of the best aspects of my work has been the chance to see longitudinal progress. I see a mother who I delivered 30 years ago come in with her young daughter behaving exactly the way her mother did as a sick child. It's been fascinating and very rewarding.

"I tell all young doctors to explore the rural general practice option. It offers a wide range of clinical applications, is extremely stimulating and you'll be the richer for it," Dr Baxter said.

Dr Ross Wilkie, Ballarat.

I was born in Perth in 1942 and graduated MBBS from the University of WA in 1964.

My first rural posting was as a Flying Doctor with the RFDS in Derby in 1968 - from there, I returned to Royal Perth Hospital and subsequently Royal Melbourne Hospital to complete my training.

I commenced practice in Ballarat in April 1972 and finished full-time work, including on call, in July 2007 but remain working part-time although now not on call. I am a Consultant Radiologist with a special interest in spinal intervention and treatment and was President of the International Intradiscal Therapy Society in 2000.

We provided services to Ararat, Stawell and Maryborough. More recent developments in remote area telecommunication networks have helped to diminish the issue of centrality in medical practice. It helped me to combine work in a public hospital with private practice and to maintain consultant appointments in Melbourne.

Despite long hours I, gratefully, always could spend more time with my family, as I lived within five minutes of work and schools. That's the real benefit of regional life.

In Ballarat, the great privilege of my professional life has been treating and helping people with severe painful spinal conditions. I am grateful to the Ballarat Orthopaedic Surgeons who encouraged and mentored me into assuming a clinical and treatment perspective which enabled patient referrals locally and interstate.

Rural practice has great challenges and rewards – we'll see further improvements as connectivity and communications improve. The concept of *rurality* is perhaps better replaced by one of *distance*. I am sure that a younger generation will continue to see advantages in distanced locations practice.

"Practising radiology in Ballarat has enabled me to work more flexibly and efficiently in regional hospital imaging and treatment facilities than ever would have been possible in a metropolitan setting," Dr Wilkie said.